

CHAPTER ONE

My Friday started out great. But the dead body rolling down the hillside took care of that.

One minute the boys and I were trotting down the driveway, which is nearly a quarter-mile long and meanders through the forest alongside a small creek--all excitement and anticipation. The next minute a corpse joined us, plopping into the nearby creek with a splash.

Talk about a shocker. My legs threatened to buckle and I was torn between getting a closer look and running the other way. Considering the state of my knees and stomach, running trumped looking.

Murph and Mac, my dogs, insisted on investigating. I was just as insistent they didn't. Thank God they're obedient or they would have yanked my arms right out of their shoulder sockets on the mad race back to the house. Murph's a 98-pound Rottweiler, probably purebred. Mac, a black lab mix, only weighs in at about 65 pounds, but they're muscular pounds. I rescued both from the animal shelter and they're better company than just about anyone I know.

Back to the dead body. After dropping onto the couch to calm my shaky knees while calling 911, I left the boys in the house and trotted back down the driveway. The body remained undisturbed, still lying half-in, half-out of the creek about three feet from the edge of the driveway. Not that I expected it to disappear--it was missing the back half of its head and, judging by the smell, there was no mistaking it for someone who'd get up and walk away. The wildlife, however, concerned me. Have you ever seen what happens to road kill in the mountains of western Montana?

## *Second Time Around*

I live twenty-five miles north of Missoula in the small town of Jocko. Say *Montana* and people think cattle and endless fields of grain, droughts in the summer and thirty below during winter. They think cowboys, Indians, and the vastness of nature. All that *is* Montana but it's also the Rocky Mountains, four human inhabitants per square mile, and the most peaceful, restful, place you ever set foot on. On top of all that, western Montana is truly the last best place: we have milder weather than the rest of the state—it's not much different from New England. Unless you count summer wildfires and the lack of an occasional hurricane in September. A lot of the wildlife is similar to what I used to see in New England, as well--the deer, coyotes, black bear, and moose. I've never worried about the four-legged creatures in my neck of the woods. Until the appearance of the fellow in my creek, there'd been no reason to worry about the two-legged ones, either.

Anyway, I stood guard over the body in my yard, a victim of human predators I'd never expected to invade my patch of the Rocky Mountains. Just goes to show that the safest place you ever set foot on is still vulnerable.

And I don't think it's because everyone and her mother owns a gun in Montana. Hunting is a passion in Big Sky Country. People out here don't take vacations at Christmas. They take them during hunting season in October and November. As a result, animal heads decorate many of the walls you see in these parts, especially those antlered beings indigenous to the Rockies: elk, big horn sheep, mulies, and white-tailed deer. Women hike into the Bob Marshall Wilderness right along with their men; most are able to field dress a critter in no time.

I purchased my two guns because of the wildlife, but not for hunting. My pets are at risk so far up into the mountains. Those coyotes I hear and the mountain lions I don't see would love to nibble on my housecat, Mooney, when he's sunning himself on the back porch. Under ideal circumstances, they wouldn't hesitate to sink their teeth into my dogs, either. I never had to worry

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about mountain lions back east and my current neighbors tell me I shouldn't worry out here, but still...

At the moment, I didn't truly expect wildlife to appear in broad daylight, especially with me humming Beethoven as loud as I could, but I believe in being prepared. Since my dead body had met his fate at the hands of a person clenching a gun, I opted to leave my firearms at the house and chose, instead, a Louisville Slugger as my weapon of the day. As open-minded as local law enforcement was about the right to bear arms, it just didn't make sense to tote a gun to a crime scene.

My great day had turned distinctly unpleasant; I didn't need it getting any worse. Then I glanced at the dead body and stopped feeling sorry for myself. The poor guy had experienced a day not too long ago that beat mine, hands down, for unpleasantness.

The first sheriff's deputy arrived about twenty minutes after I made the call to 911. There I was, humming Beethoven with a baseball bat slung over my shoulder, guarding the dead guy, when Jack Kendall pulled his cruiser into the driveway. We both wore sunglasses, so there was no way to tell who was more surprised. I'll bet it was me, since Dispatch had undoubtedly given him my name and address and hadn't done me the same favor.

"Hey, Jack."

He nodded. Very deputy-like, with a slight incline of his head and a little chin action.

"Timmie." Unemotional.

What else should I have expected from the guy who'd dumped me the previous summer? Good, I remember thinking. I can do unemotional. I'd been stuffing my feelings for most of my life. If Jack wanted to be stoic, I could match him.

I led the way to the little creek burbling through the culvert beneath the driveway. About three feet in, the body's legs spanned the narrow stream of mountain water. Blue wildflowers sprung

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up from the forest floor among the undergrowth. They intermingled with short yellow blooms and purple spiky ones on tall stems. I couldn't tell you their names, but they were pretty. So were the baby firs growing alongside the creek's banks, the tips of their branches a much lighter shade of green than the older needles. I suppose if you have to die somewhere, there were worse places for your final resting place than a bed of wildflowers and infant trees in the middle of the forest.

I avoided looking at the dead guy's head, or what was left of it, and focused on the rest of him. His jeans were so new they hadn't yet begun to fade and someone had actually ironed a crease into them. His maroon Grizzlies sweatshirt, on the other hand, had seen better days. The original color of his sneakers was anyone's guess; now they were a sodden, muddy mess.

"When did you find him?"

"About three minutes before I called 911."

"Do you know who he is?"

"Nope."

Jack sighed and planted his hands on his hips. "Some information would be nice here, Timmie."

Information is always helpful. Unfortunately, I didn't have any. "What do you want to know? I never discovered a dead body before. I have no clue what kind of information you're looking for."

Ask me about business systems, accounts payable and receivable, how to play around in Microsoft Office and I'm your girl. Ask me about marketing, networking, and how to keep your clients happy and I'll bend your ear for hours. Ask me about murder and I'm dumbfounded. My experience with corpses and gunshot wounds to the head was nonexistent.

## *Second Time Around*

Glaring at me from his superior height, Jack probably hoped to intimidate me. The way his brown uniform shirt showed off his muscular shoulders was impressive. So was the array of weapons and gadgets on his belt; they must have weighed twenty-five pounds. But I'd seen Jack Kendall naked and, let me tell you, if he wants to push my buttons, glaring at me fully dressed was *not* the way to go about it.

Jack shoved his sunglasses to the top of his head and stared. The severe military hairstyle complemented his give-me-no-grief attitude. Everything about Jack was rock solid: his personality, his muscular body, his expression. Once upon a time, I used to believe his sturdiness was a virtue.

“What were you doing when you saw him?” he asked.

“I was walking the dogs.”

“And?”

“The body just rolled down the hill.”

He raised an eyebrow. “It plopped into the creek all by itself?” He pronounced it *crick*, as the locals did, something I couldn't ever imagine doing.

I rolled my eyes. “If there was a leprechaun at the top of the rise who pushed him, Jack, I didn't see.”

He ignored my sarcasm. “Did the dogs go near him?”

“No, they didn't.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“Because they were on leashes and I didn't let them.”

He bestowed another deputy-like nod upon me. This time, I must have done better. “Then what?”

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“Then we ran like hell up the driveway, I locked the dogs in the house, called 911, and trotted back down here to wait for you.”

He stared at me, allowing his gaze to travel south of my face. Thank God I’m not a blusher. When his gaze met mine, he hitched his chin at me. “What’s with the baseball bat?”

“It’s a Louisville Slugger.”

He stared at me some more. I stared back. When your mother is a drama queen, you learn the value of silence, the benefit of sarcasm, and the pleasure of sheer perversity.

We dated for eleven weeks last summer and, although he claimed our involvement hadn’t reached the relationship stage when he broke it off, he knew me fairly well. Well enough to detect that I can be a bit stubborn.

He capitulated first. “You have a game?”

“Not at the moment. I’m talking with a sheriff’s deputy.”

“Cute, Timmie, cute.”

I could have responded in any of a dozen ways. Unfortunately, none of them would have portrayed me in a favorable light. I turned my back on the body and resumed humming.

“Are you sure you don’t know who he is?” Jack asked after a couple of bars.

I turned to face him. “Not from the back.”

The corner of his lips twitched. “How about from the front?”

“I haven’t seen his face. It’s pressed into the ground.” I met his gaze and shook my head. “No, Jack, I haven’t been anywhere near the body. Certainly not close enough to roll him onto his back or go through his pockets.”

“Just checking.”

## *Second Time Around*

“You’re being very thorough. I’ll be sure to pass along your attention to detail to your superiors if I chat with them.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate it. I was appointed deputy coroner a few months back, so now it’s my job to investigate deaths in the county.”

“What does a coroner do? Autopsies?”

Jack frowned. “No. In Montana, the coroner is a law enforcement official. In my case, a sheriff’s deputy. I determine the cause and manner of death in situations that don’t involve natural death. I can order an autopsy but only a licensed physician appointed by the state medical examiner can perform one.”

Aha. I got it. Car accidents. Murders. High-profile deaths, complete with media attention and drama. Not little old ladies passing on in the nursing home. A mover and a shaker, our Jack. Although he’d been aiming for that goal last summer, I hadn’t realized precisely what it entailed.

Before I was able to offer congratulations, a pair of cruisers skidded to a halt behind his vehicle and two more deputies joined the party. He marched over to his colleagues, a man with a mission, a man as confident and sure of himself as any I’d ever met. Although the murmuring of their voices reached me, the actual words did not. Jack pointed to the body and I took that as a sign to disappear.

What were the odds, I speculated as I toddled up to the house, of Jack Kendall being the responding deputy to any call I made to 911? A hundred to one? A million to one? After all those months without catching a glimpse of him--not driving by on the street, not in line at the grocery store, not at a board meeting of the city’s DUI task force--why now? I sensed the hand of Fate, poking its interfering fingers into my life.

*Second Time Around*

It was bad enough I'd stumbled across a dead body. I surely didn't need Jack Kendall included in the state of affairs.

## *Second Time Around*

All three of my boys met me at the front door: Mooney purring like an outboard motor, Mac dancing a canine jig, and Murph's little stub wagging his entire rear-end.

These guys loved me. They didn't think I was too smart, too independent, or too intense—like Jack did. They thought I was wonderful and would never throw me over for anyone, especially not some milquetoast woman who lacked self-esteem to the point she'd devote all her energies to a man instead of herself. If that was the kind of woman Jack preferred, as he'd told me last summer in an effort to be honest and spare me from being hurt, then he was welcome to her.

Who needed Jack Kendall?