

Chapter One

Melvin Walker didn't care what anybody else said, he loved winter. Frigid temperatures were good for the porn business.

He sniffed the greenbacks in his hand. They smelled like prosperity.

Soon the teenagers would be out of school for the holidays. Melvin grinned as he considered the hormone-driven boys who slipped into his video store and sneaked glances at him as if he were Santa Claus. Yeah, he was making a list and checking it twice for those bad boys.

The lone customer in the video store slung open the door. The wind threatened to take it from its hinges. He clutched his brown plastic bag to his chest in a frantic embrace and slammed the door behind him.

Melvin grabbed his parka and trotted to the front door where he glanced out to make sure no more cars had pulled in. Closing the store when business was good irritated him, but he needed to run by the jewelry store to pick up Delia's Christmas present. He couldn't wait to see the look on his wife's face when he slapped that gargantuan rock on her finger.

The lot was empty. Too cold for those goody-two-shoes who were always protesting an alleged assault on their family values in front of the store. Good, he could be gone for an hour. Shoving his gloves under his arm for a second, Melvin slid the key in the lock and turned it. He felt rather than heard a presence. He wasn't alone on the sidewalk. He turned and found himself staring down the barrel of a Winchester rifle.

"Oh, it's you." He felt a bubble of relief. "What're you doing with that gun?"

No answer.

“Well, what do you want? As far as I’m concerned, we ain’t got nothin’ to talk about.”

The barrel of the rifle wavered. “What you’re doing is wrong, and you have to pay for it.”

Melvin laughed. The sound carried on the icy Kansas wind that cut right through him. “Get off my property. And don’t come back, or I’ll call the cops.”

Melvin tugged on his gloves, turned his back on the rifle, and started toward the Excursion. The explosion of sound served as a preliminary to pain so acute that he stumbled forward, unable to breathe. He tried to understand what had happened. No one messed with him.

His numb legs slid out from under him, and he pitched forward.

He slammed into the asphalt, the pain of his face hitting the ground mild compared to his fear. Far less than the fire that spread from his back into his chest and his gut.

He tried to pull himself up, but his arms no longer worked. He rolled over on his back.

The sun shining in his eyes disappeared. The rifle appeared. Melvin hung on to a thread of business acumen and tried to negotiate a deal. “No. No, not again. I’ll give you the money.”

His voice sounded wet and far away in his own ears. Liquid bubbled up in his throat, making it hard to talk. Melvin tried to lift his hand, which he thought still clutched his key ring. He couldn’t be sure. “Here, take the key. It’s right here. I’m sorry. I’ll give you the combination to the safe. Call 911. Please. Help me.”

The second shot didn't surprise him. The pain receded on a horizon that narrowed until it disappeared into nothingness.

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"I can do this." Roberta Simmons's breath billowed in white, smoky puffs. She glanced around. No one near to see her talking to herself, thank goodness. She stood outside the newspaper office in downtown Bliss Creek, carrying on the conversation in broad daylight. Alone.

"I'm not crazy. I'm nervous." In case someone heard her.

She was a seasoned, experienced reporter—at least she had been before family and a foray into college academia had led her astray. The *Bliss Creek Chronicle* editor would see that and hire her.

"I should've worn the green suit." Again, aloud. Roberta gritted her teeth, sucked in her belly, and stuck out a gloved hand to grab the door handle. The door opened and smacked into her outstretched fingers. "Ouch!"

A man in a wheelchair peered up at her, one hand shading his eyes against the sun. "Sorry." He didn't look sorry. "Are you coming in or are you going to stand out there all day, talking to yourself and freezing your behind?"

Trying to place the man's face, Roberta shook her fingers to ease the pain. His brown eyes and irregular nose seemed familiar. "Is that how you greet all your customers?"

"You don't remember me, do you, Bert?" A faint touch of sarcasm registered along with the fact he knew her childhood nickname. In the three months since she'd returned to Bliss Creek, Roberta had discovered that her twenty-year hiatus hadn't

dimmed the memory of anyone who lived in this small Kansas town of five-thousand. Even if she'd blocked out the memory of most of them.

Embarrassment made her rude. "No. Give me a hint."

"Homecoming your junior year. Slow dancing."

"Curtis." He'd been a skinny beanpole then, no sign of the massive biceps and shoulders that pressed against a crisp white dress shirt now. The memory washed over Roberta. He held her close, but not too close, the scent of Old Spice tickling her nose even though she couldn't see a single whisker on his smooth, coffee brown cheeks.

Kids whispered in clumps along the edges of the dance floor. When the music ended, someone made a snide comment. Everybody laughed. Roberta darted away to hide in the bathroom. She and Curtis Washington never talked again. "Curtis Washington."

"One and the same. Would you like to come in, or are you going to make a run for it?"

Roberta stiffened. "Of course, I'm coming in."

Curtis wheeled the chair back. She could squeeze past him. The newspaper office overflowed with desks and computers, but the staff must have gone to lunch or out on interviews. The smell of newsprint made her salivate with the desire to start putting together a story.

A voice squawked over a police scanner, then went mute again.

"I heard you were back in town. How's your mother?" Curtis parked behind an oak desk buried under stacks of paper, leaned back, and waved toward a chair on the other side.

“Not so good.” Roberta skirted an artificial Christmas tree crammed against a wall and wound her way back to the desk. “Weak.”

She couldn’t reconcile the wisp of a woman in the hospital bed, slowly succumbing to cancer, with the person she called Claudia Jean and, when she was mad, mother. “It’s only a matter of time. She can’t even walk by herself anymore.”

Roberta tried not to think about the place where Curtis’s legs should have been. What a stupid thing to say. “I’m sorry, Curtis, I’m not thinking straight these days.”

“I’ve had wheels for ten years now.” He shrugged those massive shoulders. “You don’t have to pretend I’m not legless. I don’t.”

“What happened?”

“I was in the Army. Helicopter crash.”

“I’m so sorry.” The inadequacy of the words made her cringe.

“I’ve moved on.” Curtis’s expression remained oblique. “Heard about your husband.”

“Yes. He was a jerk, but he was my jerk.” Roberta pushed down the image of Joshua the day he’d told her he was leaving her for a grad student. She’d spent the next two months begging him to change his mind. Then she’d stood and sobbed between their two sons at his funeral after he’d dropped dead of a heart attack jogging with his skinny girlfriend.

Curtis looked away. “My wife couldn’t handle the wheels. She also moved on.”

“I’m so sorry.” Again with the sorry.

He shrugged. “I’ve learned to live with that, too. At least you got some kids out of it.”

Roberta shifted in her seat, trying to ignore the sudden look of sympathy on Curtis's face. "Yeah, two boys."

"If there's anything I can do to help . . ." Curtis's voice had lost its edge.

"Why would you help me after I ditched you at that dance?"

He glanced down at his chair and then met her gaze. "Your dad died in Vietnam. That makes you a victim of war, too."

The awkward silence stretched. She studied her hands. "There is something you can do for me, actually. I'm interested in working here. Who does the hiring?"

"Well, well." His gaze turned assessing. "That would be the managing editor. Me."

Roberta considered. She knew Curtis. At least she had twenty-some years ago. She rummaged in her briefcase and handed him a resume. "You know I have my degree from KU and experience at the *Dallas Morning Times*."

He studied the papers. "Three years of reporting seventeen years ago. Nothing since. Have you done anything besides teach lately?"

Raised two children. Watched a husband progress in his career while ignoring her. Suffered when he left her for another woman. Buried him. Came home to watch her mother die. "I've done some freelancing."

She held out a sheaf of clips. He shoved aside a stack of newspapers and spread the articles in front of him. "Let's see. A poem in the Lifestyle section, three articles on academic subjects. A couple book reviews. Hot stuff."

"No need to be nasty. Writing is writing."

"It doesn't matter. I can't afford another reporter."

“I bet you don’t have a reporter with my experience. I bet you have a huge turnover of college kids who stay just long enough to get a few clips and move on.” It wasn’t about the money. Her divorce from Joshua hadn’t been final when he died. She had his life insurance money. The kids got his Social Security. The preppy grad student got nothing. “I work cheap and I’m here for the long haul.”

Before Curtis could respond, the scanner crackled. A voice boomed. “Mike, we have a man down here. We need an ambulance. Gunshot wound. We have a gunshot wound.”

Curtis wheeled around and zipped toward the table where the scanner sat. “What the—that’s Larry Jenkins talking. Did he say gunshot wound?”

Larry Jenkins. Roberta winced. Her new neighbor. Her brothers’ best friend, Larry had teased her without mercy when she was a kid.

“Boss, did you say gunshot?” For a second Roberta thought the dispatcher, whose voice squeaked with excitement, had heard Curtis’s question and repeated it. “What’s your twenty?”

“Yes, I said gunshot. I’m at Walker Video. Get someone out here. Now. It looks like someone shot him in the back—and the neck. He’s bleeding like a stuck pig.” Larry sounded angry. “And get a hold of the chief. He needs to get over here.”

Curtis spun the chair around. “Well, go!”

“What?”

“I’m here alone.” Curtis grabbed a slim reporter’s notebook from the closest desk and hurled it at Roberta. “Show me what you’ve got.”

Roberta caught the toss. Adrenaline shot through her. She stood and stumbled toward the door. The scanner crackled. Larry's voice followed her. "Mike, I've got two shell casings from a rifle. No weapon here. We've got a shooter out there somewhere."

"Bertie!" Roberta glanced back at the urgency in Curtis's voice. "Take a camera. And be careful. We don't know what's going on out there."