

## Chapter One

### *An Intruder in My Father's Home*

The withered old man slouched next to me lived life as a curmudgeon. To look at him he seemed the kind of diamond in the rough you'd find glued to a leatherette stool in a stinky bar and drowning in a dirty martini. Rather, he was an unconscionable prick and a lying cheating good-old boy's lawyer to the rich and famous. He was also my dad.

I couldn't see ten feet of pavement ahead of me. The few other drivers on the highway were either behind the wheels of hardy SUVs or snowplows, or suicidal nuts. I didn't know what category applied to me. I'd rented the SUV at the airport but had absolutely no idea how to drive in blinding snow. Guess that put me in the nut category.

What should have been a ninety-minute drive approached three hours with ten miles to go. And it wasn't like I could enjoy the good company. Two aides had loaded Dad into the passenger seat, warning me one final time not to expect much. I drove along with a sidekick something like a paralyzed Marcel Marceau. *Nothing.*

My cell rang, causing a shockwave of already shaky nerves to jolt up an electrified spine. I should have pulled over, but crawling at fifteen miles an hour, I chose to follow a rare shield of safety—a big rigger who seemed to know where he was going. I determined to stay close behind his lead.

“This is Breecie Lemay.”

My fiancé could be trying at times, at best. I guess he thought the ten years difference in our age gave him a license to lecture me. “I've been calling for hours. Your damn roaming service isn't working. I've been worried sick.”

“Adam. I forgot to turn on my phone when I got off the plane, and now, well, in this blizzard, I'm surprised any calls are getting through.”

“Where the hell are you?” Adam asked, sounding more irate than concerned.

“Almost to Trinidad. At least I think I am. I can't see the road signs through the snow. Going straight to the hospital.”

Two months earlier Dad had been airlifted to St. Mary-Corwin Medical Center in Pueblo, Colorado, where a special stroke center attended to him. The team of specialists did as much as they could. They had physically stabilized him, but full rehabilitation seemed less and less likely with each passing day. His doctor decided to send my father to Mt. San Rafael Hospital, back in his own sleepy town of Trinidad, where the old-fashioned healing elements of visiting friends and neighbors coupled with physical therapy would be more likely to provide an effective treatment.

Adam Chancellor, my fiancé of two full years, offered to pay the medical transport service so I didn't have to get involved. I declined. I couldn't muster up a cold heart even though Dad probably deserved to be dragged behind me in a rickety old sled.

“You do have your room confirmed for late arrival? You know they won't hold it for you.” Adam lectured.

“I've decided to stay at Dad's. No reason not to. The neighbor lady opened up his house for me.”

“You call me the moment you get there.”

“Of course.”

I snapped the phone closed, stealing a quick glimpse across at Dad, his body slumped against the confines of the seatbelt.

“I love you, Daddy. I’m here for you. Like always.”

Dad let out a gigantic fart, fueled with the ripe stench of the best of them. It was the only noise I heard from him the entire trip.

Easy procedures and a prepared room allowed me to quickly admit my dad at the small hospital and within the hour I found the front door to his home unlocked.

It had been a couple of years since I’d been there, and only once. But that’s another non-satisfying memory of dear Dad.

I spotted the decanter of Napoleon brandy exactly where I remembered it, next to my dad’s favorite reading chair. I recalled the rich smell of his leather-bound law books, except this den had taken on an unfamiliar musty smell. Old newspapers and clipped store coupons littered the tables, along with several half-empty bottles of prescription medications and a film of dust that rivaled anything Mt. Vesuvius could spew.

The gnawing feeling began somewhere in my heart and worked its way down into my stomach. How was I supposed to know no one was taking care of my dad? Damn it! How was I supposed to even fathom he needed care giving? He sure as hell didn’t think to mention it. I moaned, resigned to the corkscrew wave of guilt laced with perpetual disappointment I always associated with Father. I poured myself a brandy in the nearby Baccarat snifter. Dusty, but doable.

My safe-call to Adam went directly to voice mail. Probably he’d gone to bed. It would have been nearing midnight in Washington. That meant it was midnight by my internal clock, but I wasn’t ready to retire to my dad’s guest room. Instead, I found myself picking up the snifter and roaming from room to room, an intruder in my father’s home.

He’d moved there after my mother’s death. A city man by all accounts, Dad enjoyed the opera, society soirées, and a slate of intellectually stimulating advisory board meetings. No one understood James Lemay’s urgency to give up his D.C. law practice and retire to the quaint, but remote and culturally challenged Colorado town.

The third step creaked as I made my way up the darkened staircase. Familiar family photos lined the landing wall. There were no photos of Mom, but Dad was big on his kids’ successes, so most of the framed images were of my twin sister and me. They gave proof to our measurable achievements, like when we graduated high school, college, and law school.

My fingers traced the soft wood of several frames as I studied the photographs. My sister looks nothing like me. She has ginger-colored hair, wavy, always flowing like wheat moving across the Great Plains of the Midwest. My hair is black as a raven, thick, and straight. She is a short woman with a demure attitude to match. At five-foot eight, I tower over her in bare feet, and I guess most often my tenacious nature matched that of the aforementioned predatory bird.

After passing the bar, my sister married, and up and moved to London. There she delivered two beautiful children in three years, but there were no photos like that. Dad didn’t consider those Kodak moments. He was pissed she wasn’t practicing what he preached—‘the word of the law.’

I slipped through the double doors leading into Dad’s bedroom. The bed linens were soiled and what had been an unpleasant musty smell downstairs turned decidedly foul. I peered into the coffee mug on his nightstand. It reeked with a greenish-black mold. I’d had enough. I

turned fast on my heels and slammed the doors behind me.

My god. What did I expect? The house had been closed up for two months. I should have been there.

Damn. I didn't want to be there.

Dad's guest room was further down the hall. Rather than face the bleak prospect of finding refuge there, I slipped back down the staircase, certain I would be more comfortable on the cold leather sofa.

That stair creaked again and my feet froze in place.

The memory filled my mind like wafts of cotton candy laced with chocolate bits. Sweet treats to my mind. The first warm feeling I'd had all day.

I was nine years old, living with my family in Washington. Daddy and I were happy, even laughing, and he was showing me how to strip wood. The board snapped loose in my hand as I worked on the stair step assigned to me. I began to cry, hysterical with certainty I had broken the stair when my daddy had told me our job was to make it perfect. I knew he would be furious.

Daddy only laughed harder and told me it was just fine for making a poor people's safe. I didn't understand, so he told me rich people all had floor safes or wall safes and if anyone ever broke into our Georgetown home, that's what they'd be looking for. Like behind the Van Gogh. That kind of thing. But my daddy could outsmart any would-be burglar because we had a fine but old house, and old houses creaked and moaned all over the place. Daddy made his own safe, inside a creaky old stair step.

The memory. One bleak smile.

Huddled tight against the cold wall of my father's staircase, I clutched the now empty glass of brandy.

My instincts, not my mind, had graduated me summa cum laude. My instincts, nothing else, had won my law cases. And now those instincts began fighting a world match. Half of me shouted, "Run away." The other half would win.

My fingers snatched away at the wood board, prying it up. Two fingernails chipped when finally the wood step shifted, opening about an inch, enough that I could slip my fingers beneath to release the metal catch I knew would be there.

Inside I found a small box marked *Cecilia*. My finger traced the letters that formed my mother's name. When she died, my father divided her jewelry between my sis and me. It wasn't enough. I craved more of my mother. I craved anything that was Cecilia's. A tear of delight trickled down my left cheek as the glowing memory of my mother's tender life consumed me. Dad had saved something for me! I grabbed the box to bring it to my chest.

Beneath it sat an identical box. This one, labeled *Erin*.

Next to that, a revolver.

With my left hand, I pulled Mom's box closer to my heart, and with my right, I reached for the gun.

Upon scrutiny, I recognized it for its rarity. It was old. Standard issue sidearm of the Imperial Russian Army. After my mother's death, forensic ballistics authorities had told us, through the sample of black powder-based ammunition and the 7.62 Nagant cartridges found at the scene, the weapon used was an antique Imperial Russian Army sidearm.

The gun I was holding in my hand was the same type of gun that fired the fatal bullets into my mother's heart.

## Chapter Two

### *Two Boxes & a Gun*

Overcome with emotion, I opened my mother's box. Dozens of papers and envelopes spilled out.

Realizing it would take me hours to go through the contents of it, I dropped both the box and the gun back into the safe. I would have to learn their story in the morning. The long flight, long drive, and long pulls on the brandy had all taken a toll on me. I crawled back to the sofa, soon slipping into a restless kind of sleep. My fears and angst played grand host to a myriad of disenchanting dreams.

I was dancing the night away at a grand gala as my mother tangoed with a bullet. She was always almost just there, but her image disappeared before I could ever find her face.

And I kept hearing my father's favorite psalm, but the chanting rang out in eerie sarcasm:

*My table thou has furnished  
In presence of my foes;  
My head thou dost with oil anoint,  
And my cup overflows.*

Sometimes sleep is not at all restful.

The first business of the morning was to find a place to stay. No bloody way in this place called Trinidad was I going to spend one more night at Dad's.

Adam's call came as I finished putting on a kettle of water and had splayed the *Yellow Pages* across the kitchen table, thumbing through to find motel listings.

"Why don't you come home? You delivered your dad into good hands. Damn, it sounds like he doesn't even know you're there," he said.

I didn't tell Adam about my discovery, only that Dad's house was filthy and I wasn't comfortable staying there. "I just want to hang around for a few days, make sure he's stable, and let some of his friends know he's back in town." *I wanted to know what the hell that Russian revolver was doing hidden in his staircase.*

"Got to go," Adam clipped. "I'm due over at the courthouse, then I have a power lunch at the *L'Enfant*. New client. Call you later."

I glanced back down at the phone book, increasingly aware of the wretched feeling eating away at the lining of my stomach. Maybe finding a room wasn't my first order of business.

Leaping off the kitchen chair, I returned to crouch by the creaky stair. With a flip of my finger, the hidden latch released and I retrieved the two boxes from Dad's homemade so-called vault. For the time being, I left the Russian revolver where it was. I guess I hoped I could find out all I needed to know about the gun within the contents of the two boxes, without ever touching it again.

The teakettle whistled. I returned to the kitchen with the cardboard boxes, stopping only to remove the pot from the burner. I deposited it on the counter, not bothering to fill my cup. All I really wanted to do was dive into the box with my mother's name scrawled on top.

The envelopes addressed to my mother spilled freely out from the top. I recognized the handwriting as belonging to my dad. I opened one, then another. Love letters. Sweet letters my father had sent to my mother when he was a young lawyer working for the Maryland Office of the State Prosecutor, and often on the road. A vague scent still lingered, a citrus-like aftershave

smell.

There was a typed bill of sale for personal items that must have accompanied the purchase of their first house. One green sofa, one pair pillows, Crosley radio and records, one large what-not shelf, one small what-not shelf.

*What the hell is a what-not shelf?* I mused.

The doorbell rang and I shoved the letters and receipt back in the box, slipping it to the floor on top of the second one. I glanced over to the staircase. Yes, I had replaced the third stair step, with its ugly secret still inside.

“Mrs. Gaines! How nice to see you again.”

I’d met my father’s neighbor, briefly, on my first and only visit to Trinidad. She was a frail woman, a widow of about sixty, and Dad’s neighbor since he first moved in.

“I just wanted to make sure you got in safely. I’m afraid I go to bed early these days,” she said. “And call me Naomi.” She smiled a broad smile. “It’s been a long time since you’ve been to visit but even still, I remember you liked my cookies.”

It had only been two years, but I didn’t remember any cookies. She offered the plate up high enough for me to see the old-fashioned sugar cookies, speckled with colorful candies.

I opened the wrought iron screen. She hesitated, shaking snow off her insulated boots before entering. “You know I keep your dad’s key, just for emergencies, but there really never has been any need. I haven’t been in this house since...”

She looked around at the mess, probably at about the same time her lungs filled with the rancid air.

“...It’s in pretty bad shape, I know. No need to be polite,” I grinned, attempting to hide the embarrassment I felt for my dad. I led her toward the kitchen, amazingly clear of all but a few food-encrusted dishes in the sink. “Join me in a cup of tea?”

I watched as her prying eyes took inventory of the room—the dirty dishes, the phone books. She swept her gaze across the boxes stacked on the floor.

“I was just getting ready to find a motel. Do you have any recommendations?”

I knew I might be inviting trouble. Mrs. Gaines, *Naomi*, knew everyone and their business in the little town. In spite of Trinidad’s population booming at around nine thousand, she surely kept her eyes and ears on the pulse of all the town’s residents.

“I’m guessing the upstairs bedrooms are as bad?” She grimaced.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” And if I told her, I was certain the news would find its way into the local paper.

“No motels. Not for you. I have the perfect place for you to stay,” she said, placing hands firmly on top of bony hips. For a moment I worried she was going to insist I stay with her.

“I have a dear friend, a widow like me, who owns the most darling bed and breakfast in the state. Now she books up early, so you let me call her for you and see what we can arrange.”

The idea of having some little old proprietress doting over my breakfast and watching my comings and goings didn’t sit well. Especially since I had more to do than just visit Dad. Now I had to find out why the hell dear old Dad was in possession of a Russian revolver like the one that murdered Mommy.

“Brecie, honey?” Naomi hung up the phone. “Did you hear me?”

“I’m sorry. Just a little tired,” I said.

“You’re all set. You have a room at The Lost Cat. You ask anyone in town, it’s a treasure. My friend’s name is Kate Vander Ark, and she’ll have a room ready for you this afternoon.”

*Fine. In spite of a doting old widow proprietress, it has to be better than this place.*

Naomi's lingering visit consumed the one hour I had free before meeting with Dad's doctor. Frustrated, I had to leave the boxes for later discovery, but remembering nosey neighbor Naomi had a key, I threw them into a garbage sack and into