

Chapter One

He'd found her. Again.

The chill churning Beth's insides had nothing to do with the biting Appalachian wind and everything to do with the letter in her hand. She wanted to fling it into the snow, let the white paper blend and melt into the icy flakes coating the mansion's lawn. But curiosity and a sense of self-preservation would not allow her to act so foolish. She looked up from the stack of mail in her hand and scanned the area.

Nothing marred the pristine white landscape of the exclusive Falling Rock community. Stately homes banked the lanes of the gated subdivision, and smoke curled from the chimneys of several houses. On the surface, all was cozy, civilized and well contained.

Was he watching her now? Delighting in her fear? Beth inhaled the frigid air and braced her shoulders. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. This was a dangerous game the recently released convict played. If he'd meant physical harm, he'd already had the opportunity to do so in Boston when he broke into her condo.

She closed the mailbox lid and strolled up the driveway, even curled her lips in the semblance of a smile—just in case he was watching from the safety of the woods that lined the mountain's ridge. *Take that, Lambert.* At last she reached the front door, and her numb fingers fumbled at the doorknob for a moment before she pushed her way inside.

The warmth enveloped Beth as she locked the door behind her and leaned against it, her knees suddenly no more substantial than pudding. The pile of letters slipped from her fingers and dropped to the marble floor.

Movement flickered at the end of the long hallway. Cynthia passed by, wearing black pants and an eggplant-colored cashmere sweater that was a perfect foil for her brown hair highlighted with caramel streaks. How could anyone look so good so soon after waking? Beth sighed as she removed a striped, knitted hat, her hair still wet from an early-morning shower. She hung up her

coat on the antique hall tree, kicked off her shoes and picked up the fallen mail, placing her letter at the back. No need to worry Cynthia about that. This was her problem.

“Morning,” Beth called as she entered the den and sank onto the leather sofa across from the fireplace. Abbie had already lit a fire, and the oak logs crackled and hissed, releasing a smoky, woody aroma.

“Morning. Would you like Abbie to bring you a cup of coffee?” Cynthia asked. “She’s in the kitchen making it now.”

Beth resisted a rueful smile. Cynthia fell naturally into the hostess role, but in fact, this house belonged to *Beth* now, not her stepmother. What was Cynthia even doing there? Usually she preferred to stay in Atlanta, close to her son. Beth picked up the mug on the end table beside her. “No coffee. I already have green tea.”

“So healthy you are.” Cynthia shot her an indulgent smile. “You and your herbal teas. Is that what’s popular in Boston with the young crowd? As for me, I need a strong dose of caffeine.”

Beth tucked her stockinged feet beneath her and sipped the tea, wishing it were a Bloody Mary. Anything to take the edge off the unease rippling down her spine. Was Lambert out there now? How much longer would he hound her? Hadn’t she suffered enough for, according to the convict, the so-called sins of her father?

“Beth? Beth!” Cynthia leaned in front of her, waving a hand in front of her face. “What’s wrong with you?”

“N-nothing,” she lied.

Cynthia’s smooth forehead creased, and she straightened. “I was talking to you, and you stared out the window looking, well, frightened.”

Cynthia might be on the self-absorbed side, but she was observant. Too observant. Beth wiggled her toes, considering how much to divulge.

Cynthia eased into a nearby chair. “Go on. Tell me. I’ll help if I can.”

She’d always been that way. A buffer between Beth and her stern father. Judge Wynngate had remained aloof and unapproachable to his only child right up until his death seven months ago. The chance for a proper father-daughter reconciliation was over.

“I had a bit of trouble in Boston,” she admitted. “Somebody had been following me, even broke into my condo once.”

“That’s terrible.” Cynthia drew back, placing a bejeweled hand with well-manicured nails against her chest. “Did the police catch the intruder?”

Beth shook her head, inwardly wincing as she recalled the cop’s skepticism when she’d told him about the strange intrusion. “I’m not even sure they believed me when I reported the break-in.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why wouldn’t they?”

“Because nothing was stolen. My stuff had been rearranged, though. My journal and papers were taken from my bedroom and laid open on the kitchen table.”

Cynthia gasped. “Why, that’s—”

“Here’s your coffee. One cream, no sugar.”

Abbie placed the steaming mug on the table and gazed at Beth, her freckled face paler than normal and her brown eyes wide with concern. So she’d overheard.

“Thank you, Abigail.”

At Cynthia’s dismissive tone, Abbie hurried from the room, avoiding meeting Beth’s eyes, which were filled with a silent apology for her stepmother’s terse manner. Cynthia affixed her sharp gaze on Beth. “Go on.”

Beth realized she wanted—no, *needed*—to talk to someone about her fear. Someone who’d take her seriously. And didn’t her stepmother deserve to know about the continued slander Lambert had flung against her dad, Cynthia’s late husband? She drew a deep breath and plunged ahead.

“The thing is, just a couple days before that happened, I’d received a threatening letter that said I have to pay for my father’s corruption.”

“Corruption?” Cynthia’s lipsticked mouth fell open. “What’s that supposed to mean? Edward was aboveboard in every way.”

“I don’t know. That’s all the note said. I immediately suspected it was written by Dorsey Lambert.”

Cynthia’s face scrunched in displeasure. “I’d hoped to never hear that name again.”

They fell silent, remembering the troublesome case of the drug dealer who’d been led from Judge Wynngate’s courtroom, defiant and screaming about corruption in the justice system. Specifically, against the honored judge himself. Lambert had vowed revenge and her father had taken the matter so seriously that he’d installed an elaborate security system for their Atlanta estate. Too bad he hadn’t done the same for this house in the North Georgia mountains.

“At least the Boston police checked out that lead for me,” she said at last. “Turns out Dorsey Lambert was released from prison only two weeks ago.”

“Did they question him?”

“Not personally. They contacted Atlanta PD, who went to the address Lambert provided the Georgia Department of Corrections. His mother vouched for him. Said he was living with her, working a steady job and completely off drugs.”

“Of course she did,” Cynthia said with an elegant lift of her chin. “What mother wouldn’t provide an alibi for her child?”

“Exactly.” Beth stared at her stepmother, wondering if Cynthia remembered doing much the same for her son, Aiden. Cynthia’s protection of Aiden had come at Beth’s expense, and her father had sided with his wife. The entire incident had created a distance from her dad that was never bridged before his death.

Old news. Let it go. Beth drew a deep breath. “Anyway, after getting that note I returned to the Boston PD to report the latest incident, and they kind of gave me the brush-off. Had me fill out a report and said they’d look into the matter.” Beth stopped, flushing as she remembered how the cop on duty had lifted his eyebrows as she’d relayed what happened. He clearly thought she’d been spooked by an admittedly creepy letter and was making mountains of molehills.

“You should have told me earlier. I can make a few phone calls and have the Boston police prodded to do a thorough investigation.”

Beth had considered it, of course. But winter break from her art teaching job had been around the corner, and she’d hoped it would all blow over by the time she returned. Her fingers tapped the pile of mail. Clearly, matters had not blown over with Lambert.

Cynthia’s gaze dropped to the mail. “What’s the matter? Did you get another letter?”

Sighing, Beth picked it up and stared at the envelope, which was postmarked Atlanta and had no return mailing information. Her name and address were printed in a standard computer font. She turned it over and picked at the edge.

“Shouldn’t you be wearing gloves?”

“Too late now.” Beth ripped it open, then frowned at the tiny scraps of paper littering the bottom.

“What is it?” Cynthia asked, leaning forward.

“I’m not sure.” She emptied the bits of paper on the coffee table and spread them out. The small pieces had crisp edges, as though they’d been precisely cut with scissors or some other sharp tool.

They were black and white and gray with printed text on the back, obviously clipped from a newspaper. She tried to arrange the text in some logical order but failed. Next, she arranged the scraps on the reverse side and gazed down at the jagged newspaper photo that emerged. Fear fizzed the nape of her neck.

She recognized the photograph. It had been shot at one of the few charitable events she'd attended with her father three years earlier. The judge was seated at a head table, Cynthia and her son, Aiden, on his right, and Beth at his immediate left. Her father held a wine glass in the air, proposing a toast to the guests and thanking them for their attendance.

In the midst of the varying shades of pixelated gray, a red marker circled Beth's body, and in the center of her chest was a red dot.

A lethal target mark.

"Oh my God," Cynthia said. With a loud thud, she set her coffee mug on the table. "I'll call Sheriff Sampson to come here at once. I really wished you had put on gloves like I asked."

"Me, too," she murmured, eyes fixed on the angry red dot.

An unexpected, warm pressure landed on her right shoulder, and Beth jumped to her feet. Twisting around, she half expected to find Lambert had sneaked in and was upon them. Instead, she faced Abbie's troubled eyes.

"Who would do something like this?" Abbie breathed, pressing her hands to her cheeks.

"I can only think of one person."

"Call the sheriff's office," Cynthia said crisply into her cell phone. It instantly obeyed her voice command, and the digital ring buzzed through the den.

"We could just go down to the station," Beth pointed out. If the local officers were anything like the Boston PD, they wouldn't find this latest letter an emergency worthy of their immediate attention.

Cynthia waved an impatient hand, phone pressed to an ear. "I'd like to speak to Harlan Sampson," she demanded.

She and Abbie exchanged a look. How like her stepmother to go straight to the top of the chain. "This is Mrs. Cynthia Wynngate of Falling Rock. It's a matter of the utmost importance."

It was a familiar tone that both embarrassed and irritated Beth. Still, she had to admit that Cynthia's air of confident privilege was one that certainly got results.

“What do you mean he’s not in? I need to speak with him at once.” Her lips pursed. “A conference, you say? When will he be back?” Pause. “Then send out your next highest-ranking officer. I’ll explain when he gets here. The address is 2331 Apple Orchard Lane.”

Cynthia tapped a button, then dropped the phone on the sofa. “We should expect them in the next fifteen minutes or so. Abbie, make more coffee and heat up those cheese Danish rolls in the refrigerator.”

Abbie slowly returned to the kitchen, casting troubled glances over her shoulder.

Cynthia retrieved her phone, aimed it at the macabre cut-up puzzle and snapped a photo. “The officer will collect this for evidence. Figured it wouldn’t hurt for us to keep a backup photo. You can’t be too careful. Do you have a copy of the first letter?”

“The Boston PD kept it.”

She gave a quick nod, already in her familiar take-charge mode. “We’ll have Harlan contact them and coordinate an investigation.”

“You really think they’ll do anything?” Beth asked doubtfully.

“Of course. I contributed to Harlan’s reelection campaign. If nothing else, he’ll investigate as a favor to me.”

A new worry nagged at Beth. What if they sent Officer Armstrong over to the house? No, no. Surely not. Cynthia had asked for the next in line to the sheriff. Hopefully, that person wasn’t Armstrong. Could she really be that unlucky? Hadn’t her morning been bad enough?

She stared out the patio door with its panoramic view of the Appalachian Mountains. Snow brushed the tips and limbs of the trees and cleanly blanketed the ground. Except for the large footprints originating at the edge of the woods and ending at their back porch.