

LEGACY OF SECRETS

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CHAPTER ONE

AN HOUR EARLIER he'd pulled up the carpet in his bedroom, pried up a couple of floorboards, and deposited a small, locked, metal box in the space between the joists. He returned the boards to their former places without nailing them down and tacked the carpet back into place.

He took a steadying breath as he sat at the kitchen table, hoping to ease the shaking in his hands that made his handwriting shiver across the page. Slipping the note on top of the wrapped package, he slid the package into a padded envelope, sealed it, and reinforced the closure with tape. Turning it over, he wrote the address on the front and left to take it to the post office.

Was it right handing this off to someone else? He thought as he drove to the post office, his hands cold on the steering wheel. Maybe he should have put it in the box under the floor, but the lid wouldn't close and, with it unlatched, he couldn't make it fit between the joists of the floor. The padded envelope seemed to stare at him from where it rested on the passenger seat, as if waiting for a decision.

The precautions felt paranoid, but he knew the conversation wasn't going to go well and he wanted this "evidence" to be

safe. He hoped he could find a way to discover the truth without destroying everything.

Mail it, he thought, you're almost halfway there.

THE PHONE call went to voice mail. Again. That made three times today and it wasn't like her father not to answer or respond to a message. Kate Earnshaw sat at her small desk in the art gallery office where she worked and worried. Maybe he was ill? Maybe he'd taken off for a few days? He rarely went out of town without letting her know. He didn't usually say where he was headed, but he always let her know. He always took his cell phone, the one he wasn't answering. She glanced at the clock on the wall again. It was four p.m., an hour and a half left to her workday.

"Doug?" She called out to the gallery owner.

"Yeah?"

"Would it be okay if I left early? I need to swing by Dad's and check on him."

Doug poked his head around her doorway. "Everything okay?"

"Probably. I just haven't been able to reach him. It's starting to worry me. Do you mind? I can stay late tomorrow to make up the time."

Doug flapped a hand at her. "Don't be ridiculous. Go. Let me know that he's okay so I won't worry too."

Half an hour later, Kate turned into the street where her father lived. The house was in an old residential neighborhood in Lakewood, a suburb west of Denver. She had grown up in the house. It hadn't changed much over the years, although the makeup of the once family-oriented neighborhood had. Many of the houses were now rentals and a few were very much the worse for wear. She let herself into the house and immediately noticed it was unnaturally quiet.

“Daddy?” There was no response.

His car sat in the driveway, but perhaps he’d gone out with one of his buddies. She walked through the living room and into the kitchen. There was a glass on the kitchen table that held remnants of bourbon, her father’s favorite indulgence. Out of habit, she picked up the glass and turned to the dishwasher, the door of which hung slightly ajar—it required a special touch to get it to stay closed.

She opened it and saw a few plates and some silverware. When she pulled out the top rack, she found a glass identical to the one on the table. Kate wondered at that. She looked at the glass she held; both were part of a rarely used set belonging to her mother’s “good china,” and her mother had never allowed them to be put in the dishwasher. It had always seemed ridiculous to Kate. Maybe her father had decided the dishwasher was fine.

Frowning, she returned the glass to the kitchen table and closed the dishwasher door. Habits die hard, though. She’d hand-wash them both and return them to the china hutch. It was odd that her father had used them, but maybe someone special had visited. So far everything looking relatively normal, but her apprehension was growing.

She walked toward the master bedroom. Her father’s bed hadn’t been made, but the room itself was tidy. *Please let him be okay*, she thought. She headed toward the den where he spent much of his time, her steps speeding up. As she got closer, a strong metallic smell hit her and lodged in her throat. It made her go cold. Her father’s recliner had always faced away from the door toward the TV. She couldn’t see the top of his head, but she could see dried blood splattered on the wall opposite the recliner.

“Daddy?” Her voice sounded faint and tinny, and her breath came in ragged hitches as she walked toward the recliner knowing, yet refusing to acknowledge, what had happened.

“Oh, god, no! Daddy, no!” she cried.

Her father was slumped in the chair. His hand dangled over the armrest where it had fallen. A gun she never knew he owned lay on the carpet next to the chair. She laid her head on his knees, now cold and stiff, and sobbed.