

The North Star beckons in the dark

Luring forth to freedom stay.

Hunters race on bloody heel

To capture massa's runaway.

Ghost train moves in black of night.

Hold your breath, child. Be still.

Cross the river. Don't stop running

Til you reach the Crescent Hill.

CHAPTER ONE

The glass door was locked, but that didn't stop Camden Bristow from yanking on the handle. The imposing desk on the other side of the glass was vacant, and the receptionist who usually greeted her had disappeared. Behind the desk, the *Fount Magazine* logo mocked her, whispering that the money she so desperately needed had disappeared as well.

She pounded on the glass one last time, but no one came to the door.

Turning, she moved to a row of windows on the far side of the elevator. Sixteen stories below, swarms of people bustled toward their next appointment. Somewhere they needed to be. Not long ago, she'd been rushing too, up and down Park Avenue to attend meetings at agencies and various magazines . . . including the suite of offices behind her.

Whenever the photo editor at *Fount* needed the most poignant pictures for his magazine, he called her, and nothing stopped her from capturing what he needed for the next edition. Human rights. Natural disasters. Labor disputes. She'd dedicated the past five years to responding to Grant Haussen's calls, but after she came back from Indonesia two months ago, he stopped contacting her.

She'd e-mailed him the pictures of the earthquake's aftermath along with her regular invoice of fees and expenses. He'd used the pictures in the next issue, but apparently discarded the invoice. She never received a check, and he didn't return even one of her many calls.

A few years ago, she wouldn't have worried as much about the money—those days her phone rang at all hours with freelance photography assignments—but her clients slashed their budgets last fall and were using stock photos or buying photographs from locals. The results weren't as compelling as a professional's work, but keeping the lights on—the rent paid—trumped paying for the best photography.

Her clients may be making rent, but she hadn't been able to pay hers for two months. Her savings account was depleted, and the income from her Indonesia shoot was supposed to appease her landlord. Even though she hadn't heard from Grant Haussen, she held out hope

that she might at least recoup the expenses for her trip so she could pay off the whopping flight and hotel charges on her credit card.

All hope shattered when she read the morning's headline.

FOUNT MAGAZINE DECLARES BANKRUPTCY

Others may have skimmed past this article, but the news stunned her. Three hours ago, she had left her studio apartment and started walking until she found herself in Midtown, in the lobby of the Reinhold Building. A few staff members might remain at the *Fount* office, packing things up, or if there were some sort of bankruptcy proceedings . . . maybe she could collect a few thousand dollars. Just enough to pay a portion of her bills while she tried to find more work.

It appeared that no one had stuck around for the aftermath.

The elevator dinged behind her, and she turned away from the windows and watched a skinny man in overalls push a mop and bucket into the hallway. He was at least two inches shorter than her five foot six.

She forced herself to smile, but he didn't smile back. She pointed at the office door. "I need to find someone from the magazine."

He grunted as he dipped his mop into the gray water and wrung it out. Shoving her fists into the pockets of her long jacket, she stepped toward him. "They owe me money."

"You and half this dadgum town."

"Yes, but—"

"They ran outta here so fast last night that the rubber on their shoes was smokin'." He flopped the mop onto the tile floor and water spread toward his boots. "I'd bet good money that they ain't comin' back."

Camden slumped against the window. Even if she were able to track down Grant, it wasn't like he would personally write her a check for money the magazine owed. He was probably out hunting for a job already, or maybe he was stretched out on his couch watching *Seinfeld* reruns, enjoying the luxury of not having to report for duty. He could collect unemployment while he scrolled Internet sites for a new gig.

Unfortunately, freelancers earned no unemployment.

The janitor pushed the mop across the tile in straight strokes like he was painting instead of cleaning it, taking pride in his work.

She understood. At one time she had been proud of her work too. There was nothing more exhilarating than flying off to a country rocked by tragedy and immersing herself into an event that most people only read about. She was on-site to see the trauma, feel the aftershocks, though she never allowed herself to get personally involved. It was her job to record the crisis so others could help with the recovery.

Because of her travels, she hadn't accumulated much stuff over the years. All she needed to do her job was her camera equipment and laptop. Her landlord furnished her flat before she moved in, and for the almost five years she'd lived there, the apartment and everything in it felt like hers. It was the longest she'd lived in one place her entire life.

But tonight, her landlord was changing the locks. Someone else had rented her home.

The man pushed his mop by her. She couldn't blame him for his indifference. This city was full of people who needed a job—he was probably doing everything he could to keep his.

She would mop floors if she had to. Or scrub toilets. It wouldn't pay enough for her to make rent, but maybe it would keep her from having to contact her mom and beg for cash.

She hopped over the wet trail left by the mop and stepped into the elevator.

Her landlord said she had until five o'clock to pack her stuff and vacate the building. The little credit she had left on her card wouldn't pay for a week in a Manhattan hotel. And the few friends she'd made when she wasn't traveling were struggling as much as she was. One of them might let her sleep on a couch, but she'd be expected to help with rent.

The elevator doors shut, and she punched the button for the lobby.

Where was she supposed to go from here?

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The town hall basement smelled like burned coffee and tobacco. The navy carpet had faded to a dull gray, and the dais at the front of the room was scuffed with shoe marks. Five men and two women sat behind a table on the platform—the bimonthly summit of Etherton's City Council.

As the town mayor, Louise Danner presided over the city council from the middle chair. Her hoop earrings jangled below the signature Bic pen she propped behind her left ear. Copper-colored bangs veiled her smudged, penciled eyebrows.

Three steps below Louise's chair, Alex Yates drummed his fingers on a stack of proposals and tried to listen as Evan Harper begged the councilors to let him tear down the barn on his property and replace it with a guesthouse.

In the eight months since he'd moved to Etherton, Alex learned that Louise Danner was almost as permanent a fixture in Etherton as the town hall. Within days of him taking this job, she told him exactly how she became mayor over the eleven thousand people in their town.

She had been born in a small house off Main Street and reigned as valedictorian over Etherton High's class of '67. Armed with a degree from Marietta, she returned home after graduation and worked in several businesses until she secured the job of hospital administrator. Louise served on almost every town committee for the next thirty years, from historical preservation to the garden club, but when she landed the mayorship almost eight years ago, she dropped anchor.

She'd spent a boatload of money to retain her position during the last election—some said she bought her seat. With the state of the town's economy, she would have to fight to keep her job when voters went to the polls in five months.

Alex rechecked the time on his phone. It was almost lunchtime, and Evan Harper was still pleading his case. Alex saw the dilapidated barn every morning on the short drive to his office. Guesthouse or no guesthouse, he agreed with Evan—someone needed to put the structure out of its misery. A hearty gust of wind would end its life if the council wouldn't approve demolition.

Alex stifled a yawn as Evan named all the people who could stay in the guesthouse including his wife's elderly parents and his daughter's college friends. Apparently, no one had told the man he couldn't get his way by filibustering city council. If the mayor didn't curtail Evan's speech, he'd probably pull out the local phone book and read until the councilors adjourned for lunch. But once they walked out of the room, they wouldn't reconvene for two more weeks.

Alex couldn't wait that long for approval. He needed an answer today.

For the past month, he'd quietly courted the owner of the ten-acre property at the edge of town—part of the old Truman farm. If the council concurred, the owner was ready to sell the land and farmhouse for a pittance. The town could buy it and use the property to help with their plans to revitalize the local economy.

Alex caught the mayor's eye and tapped his wrist.

"Thank you." Louise interrupted Evan before he finished listing off every construction supply he'd purchased for the guesthouse. "I think that is all the information we need to make a decision."

Evan plucked another piece of paper from his stack. "But I haven't read the neighborhood petition."

"We appreciate all the time and thought you've put into this, Evan." Louise propped her chin up with her knuckles. "Have a seat and we'll let you know if we have any other questions."

Evan sat on the wooden folding chair at the end of the row, and Alex leaned back as the council began discussing the hot issue of preservation versus progress.

Most of the councilors were successful business leaders and attorneys, passionate in either their pro-growth or anti-development stance. Today Alex needed to convince them that voting yes on his proposal would commemorate the town's history and lay the foundation for their legacy while generating new revenue and development.

Alex glanced at his phone. If it took the councilors forty minutes to decide the fate of a rickety barn, how long would it take them to make a decision on his proposal?

When he parted ways with corporate mania last year, he thought he'd left behind the constricting strands of red tape that kept him from doing his job, but he'd learned that Etherton's residents, along with the city council, rode the high of debate until they were forced to vote. Sometimes the debate lasted weeks, or even months.

Edward Paxton led the charge against development. He didn't want *his* town to change—nor did he want Alex involved with any of the town's business. Rumor had it that he wanted his grandson, Jake, to take the economic development position that Louise had created last

spring to solicit new business. The only problem was that no one else on the council wanted Jake Paxton to work for the town, and now Edward held a personal vendetta against him for stealing his grandson's job.

At least the mayor was on his team. She'd gambled when she hired him, but he assured her and the council that he'd deliver. On their terms.

After almost an hour of discussion, Louise called for a vote, and Evan smacked his knees when they approved his guesthouse with a 4–3 vote. He saluted the row of councilors as he rushed out, probably on his way to rent an excavator. Alex guessed the barn would be in a heap when he drove home tonight.

He sighed. *If only getting the council to approve a project was always this easy . . .*

Etherton needed the tax revenue from new businesses to fix its brick streets, increase the police force, and build a high school. The city's officials expected Alex to find a way to merge their small town charm with big city business.

Blending these two ideals was no small feat. Not long after he moved to Etherton, he worked a deal to build a Wal-Mart Supercenter on a piece of farm property at the edge of town. Some towns didn't want a Wal-Mart, but since Etherton's local economy had tanked, he thought most of the locals would welcome the store. After all, most of them drove forty-five minutes each week to visit the Wal-Mart in Mansfield, and this would bring discount clothes, groceries, car care, and—most importantly—jobs to their back door.

He was wrong.

When the council voted last December, residents of Etherton packed town hall, a chorus of dissension over why their town couldn't bear the weight of a conglomerate. The icy room turned hot as tempers flared. Small business owners threatened to overthrow the seats of every council member who supported the proposal.

In the end, the council rejected his plan. The town desperately needed the revenue and the jobs, but apparently not enough to put out the welcome mat for a mega-store. A local farmer bought the field to plant corn, and Etherton missed out on the much-needed sales tax that would flood into Fredericktown when Wal-Mart opened its doors there this fall.

The council told him they wanted new business, but they wanted something quaint that

would fit the town's celebration of all things old. It was a hard task—but he'd found the perfect solution. If the residents were willing to risk a little, he was ready to deliver both quaint and classy . . . wrapped up in a pretty package and tied together with a sound financial bow.

Louise slid the pen out from behind her ear and tapped it on the table. She dismissed the few people in the audience, explaining that the rest of the meeting was a closed session, and then she pointed at him. "You're up, Alex."

He straightened his tie and stood to face the councilors. It was about to get hot again.