

Within seconds of coming awake, Micah Smith felt a chill at the back of his neck that had nothing to do with the cold air seeping in through the window cracked open by his side of the bed. It was barely dawn. He didn't have to glance past Heather's body toward the nightstand clock to know that, but could see it in the purpling that preceded daylight when February snows covered the forest floor.

The purpling seemed deeper this morning, but that wasn't what caused his alarm. Nor was it any sound from the girls' room that caused him to hold his breath. They would sleep for another hour, he knew, and if not sleep, then stay in bed until they heard Heather or him up and about.

No. What held him totally still, eyes on that inch of open window, was the sound that came from beyond. Even in winter, the woods were filled with live things, but what he heard now was neither deer, nor owl, nor snowshoe rabbit. It was a car, moving very slowly down the snow-crusted drive toward the small house that Micah had built for his family.

*Get out of bed*, cried a silent voice, but he remained inert. Barely breathing, he listened. Not one car. Two. They inched their way closer, then stopped. Their engines went still.

*Do something*, cried that silent voice, more urgent now, and he thought of the rifle that was mounted high above the front door, out of reach of the girls. But he couldn't move — couldn't *move* — other than to turn his head toward Heather. She continued to sleep, oblivious to what he heard, unaware of the thoughts that held him there against her warmth.

As he watched the swirl of her long dark hair touched by a generous dusting of silver, he heard the stealthy click of car doors — one, then a second. He imagined that there might be even more doors opening silently, carefully guided by hands trained in covert operations.

A patch of Heather's pale shoulder showed through the tangle of her hair. He would have touched it if he hadn't feared waking her, but he didn't want that. Once she was awake, once she heard what he heard, once this moment ended, their lives would be changed. He didn't know how he knew that, but he did. A part of him had been waiting for this moment, fearing it for four years -- and it wasn't just a superstition, the idea that because one woman had left him, this one would, too. Heather wasn't like anyone else; she was unique.

The footsteps coming toward the house were careful, making only the occasional crunch on the snow, but a lifetime of living in the New Hampshire woods had trained Micah's ear well. The house was being surrounded. He figured that his rifle wouldn't do much good against the five or six people that he guessed were outside. Nor did he figure gunpower was called for. The people out there weren't intent on violence. And what was happening was inevitable.

A soft knock came at the front door, a sound he might have missed if he'd been asleep. It had begun. He quickly slipped from under the thick down with a grace that belied his height and firm build. Silently he pulled on jeans and left the bedroom. In seconds, he was down the hall and through the living room. Not bothering with a light, he pulled the door open before another knock came, though Pete Duffy's hand was already raised.

Pete was second in command to Lake Henry's police chief William Jacobs, and was a friend of Micah's, which was certainly why he'd been chosen to come. The authorities would want things kept calm. Having Pete there, a man Micah trusted, would help on that score, though the look of regret on the man's face did nothing to ease Micah's sense of dread as his eyes moved past his friend to a second man who stood just behind him on the front porch. Micah didn't know this man, or the two women who were with him. All three wore jeans and identical blue jackets that Micah knew must have law enforcement initials on the back.

'We need Heather,' Pete said in an apologetic whisper, with only the smallest jut of his chin toward the threesome with him. 'They have a warrant.'

Micah swallowed. A warrant was serious. 'For what?'

The man with Pete extended both hands. One held paperwork, the other his ID. 'Jim Mooney. FBI. I have a warrant for the arrest of Heather Malone on charges of flight to avoid prosecution.'

Micah considered the man's words. There were serious charges and not-so-serious charges. He had always known that Heather hid her past. During those times when he had wondered what might have caused her secretiveness, involvement with the law had been worst-case scenario. Now he could only pray that the charges against her were of the not-so-serious kind, though he feared those wouldn't have brought the FBI to his doorstep at dawn.

'Prosecution for what?' he asked the agent.

'Murder.'

A sharp breath escaped Micah — oddly, he felt relief. If murder was the charge, then there surely was a mistake. 'That's impossible. Heather's incapable of murder.'

'Maybe as Heather Malone. But we have evidence that her real name is Lisa Matlock, and that fifteen years ago she killed a man in California.'

'Heather's never been in California.'

'Lisa has,' the agent informed him. 'She grew up there. She was there until fifteen years ago, when she deliberately ran a man down with her car. She disappeared right afterward. Your Heather arrived in Lake Henry fourteen years ago and worked as a short-order cook, just like Lisa did in California in the two years before she left. Heather's face is identical to Lisa's, right down to the gray eyes and the scar at the corner of the mouth.'

'There are millions of women with gray eyes,' Micah said, suddenly aware of cold air on his bare chest, 'and that scar came from a car accident.' The words were barely out when he realized what he'd said. But the agent absolved him.

'Not this one. She escaped this accident unscathed, but the man she ran down died -- a man she tried to extort minutes before she ran him down.'

'Extort.' Micah snorted, more convinced than ever that a mistake had been made. 'Not Heather. I don't care what name she uses. She's gentle. She's kind. She'd die herself before she'd kill someone.'

The agent was unfazed. 'If that's true, it'll come out in a trial. For now, I need her to come out here. Either you bring her to us, or we go in.'

'You can't do that,' Micah said, straightening his six-foot-four frame. 'This is my house.'

'We have it surrounded, so if she's trying to slip out the back, she'll be caught.'

Pete scowled at the agent. 'I told you, Mooney. There won't be any trouble.' The look he turned on Micah was pleading. 'The law's on their side. We've got no choice.'

Still Micah argued. 'Eyes and a scar. What kind of proof's that?'

'We have prints,' said the agent.

Micah studied the man. 'Fingerprints?'

'Handwriting.'

Micah read enough to know a little about the law. 'That's not conclusive.'

'I'd say you're biased.'

'Same the fuck with you.'

Pete stepped between the two men. Slowly and deliberately he told Micah, 'They have a warrant. That gives them the right to take her. Don't rile them, Micah.'

A low light suddenly came on behind him, a lamp near the spot where the living room met the hall. Heather stood there. She had slipped on a robe and held the lapels shut with one hand while with the other she steadied herself against the wall. As she looked at the people beyond the door, her eyes grew wider. Micah turned to look at her. Those eyes weren't just any gray; they were iridescent. From the start, way back, they had made Micah's insides jingle, and they did it again now, holding his in a silent plea.

Responding, he held up a hand to stop the two female agents who started forward, and, instead, went to Heather himself. Slipping his fingers into the hair at her nape, shaping his hand to hold her head, he searched her eyes for a sign of knowledge or guilt. All he saw was fear.

'They say you're someone else,' he whispered. 'They must be wrong, but they need you to go with them.'

'Where?' she asked with barely a sound.

That wasn't the first question Micah would have asked if he had been in her shoes. He'd have wanted to know who they thought he was and why he needed to go with them. If Heather was truly in the dark as to why they were there, she would have wanted to know that.

But she was a practical sort, far more so than he.

'I don't know,' he murmured. 'Maybe to Willie Jake's office.' He glanced over his shoulder at Pete. 'They just want to question her?'

Before Pete could answer, the two women approached. 'We need to book her,' one told him before turning to Heather. 'If you want to dress, we'll go with you.'

Heather's eyes flew from one woman's face to the other, then to Micah's. She put a hand on his chest, burying it in the hair there as she always did in moments of passion, anchoring her then against abandon, anchoring her now against the terror that had seized her.

'I'll take her to dress,' he said, but one of the agents was already grasping her arm and reciting her Miranda rights, as Micah had heard done dozens of times on television dramas. The moment would have been terrifyingly real even without Heather's eyes clinging to his.

Frantic to help her, desperate to do something, but realistic enough to know he was hamstrung, Micah glanced back at Pete. 'Someone's gonna answer for this. It's wrong.'

Pete came forward as the two female agents ushered Heather down the hall. 'I told them that. So'd Willie Jake. He spent most of last night trying to talk some sense into them, but they have the warrant, Micah. It's legal. There's nothing we can do.'

Micah turned back to Heather, but she had disappeared into the bedroom. When he turned to go after her, Mooney caught his arm. 'You have to stay here. She's under arrest.'

'Daddy?' came a soft voice from even farther down the hall.

'Oh God,' Micah murmured and turned in alarm. It was Melissa, his seven-year-old daughter. In a voice that was as normal as he could make it, what with a growing panic, he said, 'Go back to bed, Missy. Too early to get up.'

But Missy, by far the more curious and bold of his two girls, padded toward him in her long pink nightgown. Her hair was as dark as his -- and as thick and long as Heather's -- but wildly curly. 'Why's Pete here?' she asked, slipping a hand into Micah's, but looking at Mooney. 'Who's he?'

Micah shot a frantic glance at Pete. 'Uh, he works with Pete sometimes. They have to ask Heather some questions.'

'What questions?'

'Just some...things.'

'Now?'

'In a little while.'

She looked up at him. 'When the sun comes up?' That would make sense to her. It was what Heather had taught the girls when they'd been toddlers and had awakened Micah and her at ungodly hours.

'Yes.'

Her eyes grew mischievous. 'I'll bet she's still asleep. Can I go tickle her?'

'No.' He tightened his hold on her hand. 'She's already awake. She's getting dressed. I want you to go back to bed. Make sure your sister sleeps a little longer.'

'She's awake. She's just scared to come out.'

Micah knew it wasn't as simple as Star being scared or shy. He had long since accepted that the five-year-old possessed an odd adult insight. Star would know that something was desperately wrong. Her fear would be real.

'Then go back in and play with her. That'll make her feel better.'

Missy smiled and released his hand. In the few seconds it took for her to step back and flatten herself to the wall, her expression turned defiant.

'Missy,' Micah warned, waving her back down the hall, but before she could refuse, Heather emerged from the bedroom with the two female agents. She was dressed in jeans and a heavy sweater, the sheer bulk of which made her look lost. Her expression mirrored that. When she caught sight of Missy, she stopped short. Her eyes met Micah's for a single, alarmed second before returning to the child.

Missy was looking at the two agents. 'Who're *they*?'

Micah said, 'More friends of Pete's. Go on back in with Star, Missy. I need you to help.'

Missy stayed pressed against the wall.

Heather knelt by her side. 'Daddy's right, sweetie,' she said in a gentle voice. 'Go in with Star. She needs you.'

Defiance gone, replaced by worry, Missy slipped an arm around Heather's shoulder. 'Where are you going?'

'Into town.'

'When'll you be back?'

'A little later.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Do you promise?'

Waiting for the answer himself — hanging his future on it much as the child was -- Micah saw Heather swallow. But that was the only beat she missed. In the same soft voice, she said, 'I'll do my best to be here when you get home from school.'

'Do you *promise*?' Missy repeated.

'Yes,' Heather whispered. As she straightened, she pressed a kiss to the child's head. She closed her eyes, and a look of anguish crossed her face. Micah imagined that she held the kiss a beat longer than she might have. Sure enough, as she came toward him, her eyes were filled with tears. When she was as close as she could be, she whispered, 'Call Cassie.'

Cassie Byrnes was one of Heather's closest friends, and she was a lawyer.

Micah took her hands, only to find that the sleeves of the bulky sweater concealed handcuffs nearly as cold as her skin. Furious, he turned on Pete, who raised a brow in warning and nodded toward Missy.

'Call Cassie,' Heather repeated — which was certainly the right thing to say, certainly the *practical* thing to say, though not what Micah wanted to hear from her. He wanted her to profess utter confusion, to insist that a mistake had been made, to protest her innocence, even to cry and loudly declare that she had never in her life heard the name Lisa Matlock -- all of which might well be the case, Micah told himself. But yes, Heather was a practical woman, and yes, given the circumstances, especially with the legality of the arrest warrant as vouched for by Pete, cooperating was the only thing to do.

Still, the handcuffs offended him. A small person like Heather didn't have a chance in hell of overpowering these three agents, plus however many were outside, even with both hands free. Not that his Heather would think of fighting. In the four years that they'd been together, he had never seen her lash out in anger at anything.

When the two female agents ushered her toward the door, he followed closely. 'Where are you taking her?'

Mooney stepped in his path as the agents whisked Heather outside. 'Concord. She'll go before a magistrate there this morning. She needs an attorney.'

*Go before a magistrate.* Micah's eyes flew to Pete, who said, 'They have to return the fugitive flight warrant.'

'Is she being charged with murder?'

'No. Not charged with anything yet. They return the warrant and ask for extradition. Heather can choose to waive an extradition hearing and go back with them, or she can fight it. They can't take her back — can't charge her with murder or anything else — until they make a solid enough case that the charges are legit.'

Micah wanted to know the how, why, and where of everything Pete was talking about, but he had more immediate questions, and Mooney was leaving. Following the agent out the door, he trotted barefoot down the steps, oblivious to the crusted ice on the wood planks, the snow on the drive, and the subfreezing air on his near-naked body. 'I'm coming with you,' he announced — a totally *unpractical* thing to say, since he couldn't take the girls with him and they couldn't possibly stay here alone, but his words were driven by emotion, not logic.

Mooney ignored him and kept on going.

Pete became the practical one. 'Not wise to do that right now.'

Eyes on Heather, Micah watched her vanish into the back of a dark van, the vehicle farthest from the house. At the same time, two other men materialized from the woods and slid into the van.

Micah began to run. 'I want to go with her.'

Pete ran alongside him. 'They won't let you. You'd be better going down later with Cassie. Let these guys go without a fuss now. Get them out of here before the sun's up. There's less of a spectacle that way.'

Micah hadn't begun to think beyond the moment. Looking now, he saw that the sky had indeed begun to brighten. Pete had a point. But when the deputy pulled at Micah's arm and tried to steer him back to the cabin, Micah tugged free and ran on. He stopped at the closed door of the van, bent down, and flattened a hand on the window. His eyes met Heather's just as Mooney started the engine, and short of running alongside until the van gained enough speed to leave him behind, he had no choice but to stay. Straightening, he stared at the head that was turned and looking back at him. He held that gaze until the van rounded a bend and disappeared down the forest drive.

She was gone.

Suddenly, he felt cold inside and out. Turning fast, he started back toward the house. Of the two cars he'd heard earlier, only Pete's Lake Henry cruiser was left.

'Some friend you are,' he muttered as he stormed past the deputy.

'Hell, Micah, what could we do?' Pete cried, following him. 'They had the warrant for her arrest.'

'You could have said it was wrong. You could've said they made a mistake.'

'We *did*. But, Christ, they're FBI. It was already a federal issue. What could we do?'

'Call us. Warn us.'

'How would that've helped? Would you have run off, like you were guilty of something? This was the only way, Micah.'

Micah took the front steps in twos, energized by anger.

'Look at it this way,' Pete said. 'They have to *prove* she is who they say. You think anyone here's going to say she's someone else? No way. So they're going to have to dig up other people. That'll take some time, don't you think?'

What Micah thought was that *any* amount of time he was separated from Heather was bad. He wanted her with him, and not just for the girls' sake. He had come to depend on her gentleness, her sureness, and — yes— her practicality. He was a nuts-and-bolts guy who sometimes was so focused on the small details that he didn't see the larger picture. Heather did. She was his helpmate when it came to being human. She was also his partner when it came to maple sugaring, and the season was about to start.

But she wasn't here. And he did need to see the larger picture. In this instance, that meant calling Cassie.

Striding into the house, he shut the door before Pete could follow, then promptly forgot about Cassie. Missy stood in the middle of the living room looking crushed, and though there was no sign of Star, Micah was sure she was near. He looked around the living room, behind and under the sofa, the chairs, the large square coffee table that he had built at Heather's direction, but it wasn't until he looked behind him at the bookshelves flanking the front door that he spotted her. She was on the bottom shelf, tucked in beside a stack of *National Geographic* magazines that were a stark yellow against the pale green of her nightie. Her knees were drawn up and held close by her small arms. Her hair, dark like his but long, straight, and fine, lay over her shoulders like a shawl. Her eyes were woefully sad and knowing, and they were watching him.

His heart lurched. It wasn't that he had stronger feelings for Star, just that he worried more. She was a more serious child than Melissa. And introverted. Whereas Missy said what she thought, Star was quieter. She had been an infant when her mother had left — 'left' being the word he used in place of 'skidded off the road, went down a ravine, and burned up in the cab of her truck.' He knew that Star couldn't possibly remember Marcy, still he was convinced that she sensed the loss. Heather was wonderful with Star. Heather was wonderful with both of his girls. And now Heather had left, too.

Hunkering down, he caught up the child. Her arms and legs went around him as he straightened.

Not knowing where to begin, he simply said, 'Everything's okay, baby,' as he carried her down the hall to the room the girls shared. He set her on her bed. Like Missy's, it was a mess of gingham sheets, pillow, and down — Missy's pink, Star's green — all of which, again, was Heather's doing. 'And everything's going to be okay. But you can help me out now, baby. I need you and your sister to get dressed while I make some calls. Then we'll have breakfast together.'

'We won't wait for Momma,' the child said in a sure little voice.

'No. She'll have breakfast in town.'

'What'll she eat?'

He thought for a minute. 'Eggs? Waffles? If we eat the same thing, it'll be like she's with us. What do you think?'

'Maybe.'

'Oatmeal,' Missy announced from close by. 'Oatmeal's her favorite. She'd be having that. But I can only eat it if it has lots of maple sugar on it.'

'Well, we have lots of maple sugar, so we're golden. Help your sister dress?' Micah said and, with a return of the urgency he had felt when the FBI van disappeared with Heather inside, he headed for the kitchen. Halfway there, he did an about-face and went back down the hall, this time to the room opposite the girls'. He had added this room soon after Heather moved in, hoping it would be for a child they would have together, but they'd been too busy, it seemed, growing the girls, growing the business. The floor of the room was covered with the dollhouse village he'd made for the girls and which they had arranged during a recent spate of snowy days. He had to step over the town hall and the library to reach the closet, then had to push spare clothes aside to get to the shelves built in behind.

The knapsack was on a shelf out of reach of the girls and far to the right, well hidden by clothes and boxes of Christmas decorations that had only recently been taken down. A drab brown thing, the knapsack was small and worn. Micah didn't know whether it had belonged to Heather herself or to someone else. To his knowledge, it was the only relic she had of her pre-Lake Henry days.

He pulled the knapsack from the shelf and shifted the boxes on either side to fill the space. Tucking the sack under his arm — and refusing to consider what was inside — he went through the kitchen to the back hall. Jackets of various sizes hung from hooks at all heights, as did hats, lanterns, picks, and shovels, as well as a coil of plastic tubing that Micah was repairing. An assortment of footwear was lined against the wall, crowded in by the snowshoes that they'd been using each day when they trekked up the hill to the sugarbush to clear away winter litter and to check the mainline for damage in anticipation of sugaring time.

But he wasn't going to the sugarbush now. Stepping into the largest boots in the pile, he pulled on a jacket and stuffed the knapsack inside. For good measure, lest anyone be watching from the woods, he grabbed the plastic tubing and went out, down the back steps and over the well-packed

snow on an oft-trodden path. The sugarhouse stood several hundred feet up the hill from the house. It was a long stone building with a large cupola atop, through which steam from the evaporator escaped when the sap was being boiled down.

Nothing escaped it now. There was no sweet scent, no air of anticipation. The sugarhouse and woods alike were cold and still.

Feeling only dread, Micah slipped inside and shut the door behind him. He went through the main room, past yards of stainless steel equipment, into the newly finished addition that still smelled of fresh lumber. This room was part kitchen, with a huge stove, rows of cabinets and shelves, and worktables for making candy from syrup, and part office, with Heather's computer on a desk and file cabinets nearby. Along an unoccupied wall of the kitchen half of the room, Micah set the tubing on a pile of other repaired coils.

Returning to the main room, he went to the far end where sugar wood was stacked high and deep. The wood here was a fraction of what he would use when the season began. The rest lay outside, beyond the large double doors that opened to allow an iron flatcar to bring wood in from outside along rails embedded in the floor. Back by those doors, at the rear end of the inside stack, he pulled off three logs at a time. When he found one with a significant curve, he tucked the tattered bag into the pile, put that log back, then the rest. Brushing his hands off on his jacket, he left the shed.

Back in the kitchen, he called Cassie Byrnes.

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Cassie rarely slept late. Five hours a night was all she needed, which was a blessing. She would never be able to do what she did without those extra usable hours. Add on the fact that her husband and their three children were all excellent sleepers, and she could regularly count on the late night and early morning hours for work.

This particular morning, she was doing town business. With the annual election newly done, she had been renamed chairman of the Lake Henry Committee for the fifth year in a row — which should have been shocking, since she was a woman and barely thirty-six, in both regards distinctly different from the older men who had traditionally run the town. But times had begun to change, and Cassie was a major doer. A lifelong resident who was articulate and effective, she was also on the correct side of the environmental issues that were the Committee's major concern. Most often, these had to do with the loons that arrived each April, nested, and raised their young well into November. They were gone for the winter now, flown east to fish blissfully in unfrozen seacoast waters, unaware that Cassie's current concern dealt not only with them, but with humans as well. There were many in town who, fearing for the integrity of the lake, wanted to add security in the form of three police officers, one cruiser, and the appropriate testing equipment to steadily monitor the condition of the lake. Unfortunately, these additions cost money. Cassie was currently trying to determine exactly how much, so that the strongest case could be made for increasing the real estate tax at Town Meeting in late March.

The telephone rang. Eyes flying to the clock, she caught up the receiver. It was six-thirty in the morning. This was no pleasure call.

'This is Cassie,' she said quietly.

The voice on the other end was low and tight. 'It's Micah. They arrested Heather. We need your help.'

Cassie drew a blank. The words 'Heather' and 'arrest' were not compatible. 'What are you talking about? Who arrested her?'

'The FBI. They say she has a whole other identity and that she killed someone before she moved here. Flight to avoid prosecution — that's what they're charging her with. Then there's murder. And extortion. They handcuffed her, Cassie. Handcuffed her. And Pete was with them, saying the whole thing was legal.'

Cassie remained numb for a minute. Heather Malone was her friend. They had been together the day before, barely twelve hours ago. Heather was the last person in town whom Cassie would have thought ever to be in trouble with the law. But Micah's distress couldn't be ignored, particularly if the local police were involved.

Setting aside her personal thoughts along with the work she'd been doing, she reached for her briefcase. 'It may be legal, but that doesn't mean the allegations are true. I know Heather.' She was on her feet, turning off the desk light. 'Where have they taken her?'

'Concord, I think. They said there'd be a hearing this morning.'

'Not until I'm there to represent her,' Cassie declared with a certain indignation. 'Let me find out for sure where she is, then you and I will take a ride. Pick me up in fifteen minutes?'

'Yup.'

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Fifteen minutes didn't give Micah much time to get his life in order. He and Heather had been a family long enough that he hadn't had to worry about who would take care of the girls before and after school. Thinking about his predicament now, he could conjure up only one name, one face for the job. Of all of the people whom he and Heather called friends, this was the one he trusted most.

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