

CHAPTER ONE
GET OUT OF TOWN
NO ONE NEEDS YOU HERE!!!

Angry words slashed across the gleaming mirror. Crude letters – red lipstick. She screamed! "Oh, God! Look what else they've done!"

Kevin fought his way through broken glass and torn clothing to reach her side and catch her as she fell.

She struggled to right her body, then stopped. His tightly circled arms felt strong. She moved again; panic replaced by embarrassment as she freed herself from the unexpected embrace. "What have I done to these people? First the school and now this. What a way to start." Her head drooped, the prick of tears stinging her eyelids.

"This morning was a bitch and I heard what you said at dinner. It seems to me, Sandy; no one could blame you if you just pulled up stakes and left."

Unshed tears still glistening, her eyes glowed violet as anger rose to crush her sorrow and despair. She could feel her jaws tighten, her strength return. If it was a fight they wanted, it was a fight they'd get. "I wouldn't give them the satisfaction. I'll clean up this mess and go to school tomorrow morning as if nothing had happened."

"It's probably not that simple. We need to call the sheriff. He'll probably say 'hands-off' 'til he's had a chance to look."

Sandy's sigh bespoke pent-up frustration. She had made a decision. She needed action. But she would try to listen. Kevin was hunting through the mess to locate the phone when she gave her belated permission. "While you get a hold of him, I'll check the rest of the apartment." She needed to do *something*. She held up her hands and looked through her fingers. They were still trembling, but the pounding in her ear drums was subsiding and her heart seemed calmer. Before she entered the kitchen her eyes sought quickly for a pair of Limoges vases. There they were, whole and undamaged, resting on the white painted mantle. "Thank heavens," she murmured.

"Wha'd you say? called Kevin.

"Just that my antique vases are still intact. In fact, everything in here looks okay."

He rounded the corner from the bedroom holding the remains of a princess phone. "Someone made sure you couldn't call. What was it you were worried about?"

"These vases. My grandmother brought them from France as a bride. I've always loved them, so when she broke up housekeeping she gave them to me and said they would always be our special bond." Her muscles collapsed as she half-sank, half-fell into the deep velvet chair Millie LaVoie had lent from the downstairs parlor. "I'm sorry, Kevin. I'll be okay in a minute. I guess the whole thing is

catching up to me; I can't seem to move." She dropped her head against the back of the overstuffed cushion, closed her eyes and let her arms dangle.

He moved around the room, looking first at one object, then another. Finally he stopped. "This would appeal to my mother. It's a beautiful place."

"Was, you mean."

"We could all help you put it together in a few days but now. Whenever you feel like it we should get out of here, stop by the sheriff's office and then head for the ranch."

"You don't need to do that. I'll just get a motel for tonight and worry about the rest after school tomorrow."

Uh-uh. No dice. Mom would never forgive me and besides, you shouldn't stay alone."

Sandy marshaled her arguments. "She hardly knows me and besides, your folks will be in bed by the time we get there."

"Forget it. Let's get out of here." Still numb, she gave up, took one last look at her damaged bedroom and followed Kevin into the night.