

## CHAPTER 1

Rory Callahan's Jeep Wrangler bounded over a rickety wooden bridge where he followed the dirt road into the outskirts of Taylor Crossing. He spotted a small car shelter and pulled in, where an elderly woman stood waiting. Behind her, late afternoon sunlight sparkled off a large lake.

"What's a famous journalist like yourself doing way out here?" Myrtle Hester asked with what Rory would soon recognize as her usual blunt demeanor.

"I need some uninterrupted time," he answered evasively, instantly realizing that he wouldn't go unnoticed in Taylor Crossing. Being recognized usually didn't present a problem; he'd found over the years that most people wanted to talk, especially if what they said would end up in a magazine or newspaper. He hoped that if anyone knew about Taylor Crossing's mysterious past, they would be willing to share it with him.

"The travel agent said to expect you sometime this morning," Myrtle went on as she patted an old golden retriever. "I didn't know if you'd make it after all."

Rory rolled up the car windows and got out. "I stopped in Boulder before heading up here." He'd driven into Boulder at ten and spent the better part of the day at the University of Colorado library. He had found a number of books on Taylor Crossing, but the gold mine had been some old Boulder newspaper articles he'd found in the University archives. The research captivated him, and he had soon lost track of time. When he finally realized how much time had passed, he hurriedly copied all the newspaper articles that were on microfiche and all the book references that he could find. He threw it all in the briefcase along with the rest of the research material he'd brought from New York.

"I'm just glad I made it before dark."

Myrtle looked to the west. "Sun'll be down in a while, so we better get going. The place you're renting is across the lake and there's no road around, so we'll go by boat."

"By boat's the only way?" Rory asked.

"Yep. The cabin is surrounded by some of the most rugged land I've ever seen." Myrtle pointed southward. "And most of the lakeshore isn't navigable because the vegetation grows right up to the shore, and there's more rock outcroppings, boulders, and dead foliage than you can shake a stick at. Too hard to get a road in." She gestured to the carport. "Your Jeep will be fine there." He grabbed the suitcase and briefcase from the back seat, locked the car, and followed her and the dog from the carport, past an old well with a pump and wooden trough, and onto a pier at the lake's edge, stopping at a little powerboat.

"Throw your bags in and we'll head out to the cabin." She got into the boat, helping the old dog get in after her. "Don't mind Boo. He wouldn't hurt one of these dragonflies." She gestured at a blue-green insect that buzzed past them. Myrtle was a petite woman, not five feet tall, but with enough hellcat to take on anyone. A widow from Denver, she owned not only a cabin across Taylor Lake, where they were headed now, but three others, one of which she occupied in the summers.

Rory tossed his suitcases into the boat and gingerly stepped in, and they were soon bounding over the calm water. Myrtle ignored the no-wake rules as they pulled away from the dock at Taylor Crossing, just as she had ignored some glares and a few choice words from irate fishermen who didn't appreciate the disruption she caused.

"No one will bother you out here," she called over the drone of the outboard motor. She had her ash colored hair pulled into a bun, but strands whipped around her face like loose string. "I don't get

too many people interested in this cabin, too far from the Crossing, and too much trouble unless you really enjoy boating, or rock climbing, or maybe some serious hiking. That's why it's still available in the middle of the summer." She said the last almost as a question. Her eyes, the color of light brown sugar, watched Rory, studying him.

"I don't mind boating," he said with a smile, sensing that she could tell he didn't know much at all about boats and oars and water. But when the travel agent had found the listing for the place across the lake from Taylor Crossing, Rory had been inexplicably drawn to it, as if it were a place he knew. Now, three days after he'd left New York, Rory felt like he'd been on this journey before. He shuddered as a chill swept over him, even though it felt unusually warm.

As they neared the far side of Taylor Lake, he spotted an isolated cabin that stood surrounded by thickets of trees. Behind it a sheer cliff face rose like an impenetrable fortress wall. The cabin reminded him of a haunted house, gray and uninviting. "You can use that rowboat," Myrtle pointed to a sturdy wooden boat moored at the dock. "It'll only take about a half hour to row across." She pulled her boat next to it and they got out.

"Thanks," Rory said, still studying the cabin, wondering why it seemed so familiar.

"It's the only place on this side of the lake," Myrtle told him as they walked up the path. Boo plodded along behind, then plopped down near steps leading to a porch on the front side of the cabin. Myrtle climbed the porch steps, past a bin that held some tools and an ax, opened the cabin door without a key and showed him around. The place was simple, just a great room filled with two couches, a recliner, and a huge stone fireplace; a small kitchen; and a dining area with an oak table that sat in front of a window overlooking Taylor Lake. "The original cabin was just one room," she explained. "Over the years, other owners added the bedrooms, kitchen, and bath." She then showed him the two bedrooms and one tiny bathroom with a sink, shower, and toilet. The whole place had just enough space not to feel cramped, and it should've felt cozy. But a gloom seemed to envelope the entire cabin.

"Electricity might go out on you now and again," Myrtle said. "Is that a problem?"

"I'm not scared of the dark," Rory answered.

"What about your writing?"

He smiled at her. "I'll just have to hope the battery in the laptop lasts." He didn't explain that he wasn't working on an article, nor did he say anything about why he had come to Taylor Crossing.

"There's lanterns in the closet by the door and candles in the kitchen." She told him about a few other quirks of the house, like how to operate the water filtering system, and where there was wood out the back door if he wanted to use the fireplace, just make sure he chopped up more to replace what he used. She even gave him a demonstration with an ax that was stuck in a tree stump by a woodpile behind the cabin. The whole time Rory continued to feel like he was being studied for a science project, her eyes prying for something.

"So, you've seen the place," she said after the grand tour had finished. "Still interested in it?"

"Should I not be?"

She shrugged. "Most people don't like it out here. I figured you might change your mind."

"No, it'll be fine." Even as he said this, he noticed the slight hesitation in his voice. There's something about this place, he thought.

"You want to stay here for the rest of the summer?" she asked as she took a rental form out of a kitchen drawer. They sat down at the table to sign the paperwork and square away the details of renting the cabin.

"I'll take it until October." That would give him over a month here, although he hoped he would find some answers about the town's mysteries sooner than that. And that those answers would shed light on what had happened to him in New York.

She pursed her lips. "You can stay longer, but the winters are tough up here."

"No, I'll be going back home then."

“Where’s home?”

“New York,” was all he said.

Myrtle looked at him with a hint of suspicion. “You looking to write about us?” She stared him down, like she was probing for more information about his intentions. “I know you write about weird things.”

“You’ve read my articles?”

“Don’t look so surprised. I read a lot of things.”

“Should I be writing about you?”

She huffed at him. “I didn’t say me specifically. I meant Taylor Crossing.”

“What about it?”

She eyed him carefully. “These old towns have stories to tell, that’s all.”

“Like what?” He tried to sound casual, uninterested, but he was wondering what, if anything, she knew about Taylor Crossing’s past.

“Silly tales that I’ve heard too many times and don’t bear repeating.”

He smiled at her. “Maybe sometime you can share them with me.”

“Maybe.”

After he’d paid her, Rory turned the tables and asked about his new landlord’s life. “Mouthpiece,” was how she described her husband, who’d been a lawyer at a small law firm in Denver. “Sure, he knew the law, but every lawyer’s just a hired hand who talks for you,” she joked. “He made enough money for us to live well, so I can’t complain. How many people do you know who need one cabin, let alone four? That’s what you do with too much money. But I like spending my summers in the Crossing. I just don’t want to spend my time in this cabin. Too isolated for me.” Did he detect something more, an apprehension about the place?

“I’ll let you know if it gets to me,” he said with a smile. “So tell me, why would someone build a place way over here?”

“Now that’s a good question.” Myrtle sat back in her chair. “There was a miner by the name of Burgess Barton. He’d heard about how much gold folks were finding in the Crossing, so he came on up, intent on getting rich like so many others. Only there was too much activity on the town side of the lake, all kinds of mines going up all over those mountains, and not much left for a greenhorn like him. So he decided that if there was gold over there, maybe there was on this side too. So he got a boat and rowed across the lake, stayed here for a couple of weeks until his supplies ran out, and then he hightailed it to Boulder where he went straight to the assayer’s office and put a claim out on the land here. When he came back to the Crossing, he went on the biggest drunk this side of the Continental Divide, paying cash and tossing around gold nuggets. Said he’d hit the biggest vein of gold ore that anyone had had in a number of months.”

“Is there a mine near the cabin?”

She scoffed. “There’s no mine and very little trace of any digging.”

“But why build a cabin here?”

“Wanted to protect his claim, I guess. Only no one ever saw him with gold, after that first time. But he built this cabin and supposedly was digging in a mine somewhere. Then that first winter arrived and it was hard on him.” Her face clouded over. “The story goes that he only came into the Crossing once for supplies, trekked over the frozen lake, and that when the ice finally did melt in the spring and he made it across in his boat, he looked like the grim reaper himself had come visiting during the snowstorms.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was like he’d been turned into another man, a crazy man. Folks say he was like a dead man, no essence to him. Like the hard season had sucked the life right out of him.”

Rory tried to show no reaction, but his pulse quickened. Did something happen to the miner, something that related to what the townspeople had been discussing? Had the miner seen something

like he had? “What happened to him?” he finally asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, but he felt like she was evading his question. “But I wouldn’t want to stay out here. The place gives me the creeps.”

“You must’ve stayed here sometimes.”

“Once. I didn’t like it and I told my husband if he wanted to stay here he could, but he’d be doing it alone. I washed my hands of this place.”

“So you rent it out.”

She shrugged. “Usually don’t, as a matter of fact. You’re the first tenant in more than ten years. People don’t like it out here.” She shrugged again. “Too far from town, I guess.”

His sense of foreboding grew stronger. “So what became of the miner?” he asked.

“He disappeared after that. No one knows what happened.”

“They didn’t find a body?”

She shook her head slowly. “They didn’t find anything. No notes, nothing to indicate he’d been trying to mine, certainly no gold,” she paused, “and no body. Ever. He was just...gone.”

They sat in a brooding silence for a few moments. “Well,” Myrtle broke the quiet. “I best be going.” She stood up and went outside. “Let’s go, Boo,” she said, calling the dog to her. “I came out here earlier today and left a few staples in the kitchen, in case you don’t want to come back to town now, but eventually you’ll have to come in for more supplies.”

“That’ll be fine,” Rory said as he walked with her down to the dock. “I’m a bit tired from the trip, so I’d rather just stay here for tonight.”

“I hope you enjoy yourself,” she turned to face him. The sun was sinking behind the mountains, bathing them in deep shadows. She trembled slightly as she glanced back at the cabin. “Place gives me the creeps,” she said again. Then she laughed and patted Rory on the arm. “I’m just an old woman, so ignore my foolish talk.”

She helped Boo into the boat and got in. She grabbed the briefcase. “Oh, it’s heavy. What’ve you got in here?”

“Just some notes and my laptop,” Rory said. He jumped into the boat to retrieve the briefcase himself, stumbling over a small metal box in the bottom of the boat.

“Careful with that,” Myrtle said, reorganizing the emergency supplies that had spilled out.

“When’s the last time you used this?” he asked, handing her a flare gun.

“Never, but you never know when you might need it,” she said, putting the flare gun and the other supplies back in the box. “At least that’s what my husband always said.”

Rory took his suitcase and briefcase and climbed back out of the boat, nearly losing his balance.

“Watch out, or you’ll end up in the lake.” Myrtle fired up the motor. “You be careful out here.” With a wave, she was off.

He waved back. “I’ll see you in town,” he called after her, watching the boat for a bit before heading back into the cabin.

Later, as he sat down to a dinner of canned soup, he thought about the original cabin owner. Did Burgess Barton sit at this same table, worrying about the amount of gold ore in the rocks he’d dug out of the mountain? Did the isolation tear at his mind, making him go crazy? Sitting here alone now, the place did seem kind of creepy to Rory. He half expected Burgess Barton to pop out of the closet or appear at the window to scare him.

And then, as he sat that evening, reading through some of the articles he’d brought with him, he felt a depression settling over him, along with a coolness in the air, and he wondered about the town’s past, and what it meant for him.