
CHAPTER 1

You're a disgrace to this family.

Kristen Shepherd angrily shoved her full wedding skirt away from the stick shift, forcing the car into first gear so she could get some traction on the muddy mountain road. Massachusetts's Berkshire County was known for its incredible beauty, but all Kristen could see was a few soggy feet in front of her. Her father's words were a refrain in her mind, the background cadence to her frustration over the situation she was in. His voice echoed over and over, making her clutch the steering wheel until her knuckles were white. She needed to concentrate on negotiating the small mountain road through the pouring rain, but her thoughts were spinning in every direction. Michael's deception and her father's statement made her feel like the backward teen she'd tried to leave behind so many years ago—the girl who seemed incapable of making good decisions. Why? Why hadn't she seen any of this coming before now?

Pursing her lips, Kristen mentally shook herself. She was a grown woman, not a child. She was a rising star in all the political circles in Washington. She was polished and educated. What her dad thought about her shouldn't matter. *But it did.* That was one of the reasons she'd come back to Boston to be married: a part of her wanted to prove to everyone, including her father, that she'd made something of herself. And instead, it had only confirmed what they'd always said about her. Poor Kristen Shepherd. Such a disappointment to her father. Not like her brother Brandon. Everyone was so proud of Doctor Shepherd serving his country in Iraq. A little sob escaped her throat as she thought of Brandon. She needed him here. He believed

in her, and if he were here he'd give her a hug and know exactly what to do. Blinking back the tears, she willed herself not to cry. She wouldn't give her father or Michael the satisfaction. It was embarrassing enough that she'd run away from the church, leaving her fiancé, her father, and all the guests, but she'd needed to get away as quickly as possible. Now she was headed for the one place she'd always felt safe—the cabin.

With darkness fast approaching, she strained to see, willing her tires not to slip in the mud. Wishing desperately for the wipers to go faster, she once again adjusted the ridiculous billows of her skirt away from the stick shift. "Why couldn't I have chosen something plain and simple?" she grumbled.

Her attention momentarily distracted by the volumes of skirt, the car lost traction and began skidding dangerously close to the edge of the road. She cried out as her heart thudded in her chest, but she braked carefully and quickly while trying to maneuver closer to the mountain. She didn't dare look at the ravine below. Just as she regained traction and was moving forward again, the car suddenly stalled. Kristen took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "No, please," she muttered to herself. "You have got to be kidding me." She turned the key again, hoping it would start. After three more tries she was *praying* it would start. The next turn of the key only produced a clicking sound that made her headlights dim each time it clicked. Looking at the white satin pumps she'd spent weeks picking out, she sighed and opened the door. "I can't be more than a mile from the cabin," she said firmly. "I'll just have to walk."

As soon as she stepped from the car, she was drenched. Her upswept hair began falling down, the ringlets now hanging straight and straggly around her face. Her gown was streaked with mud from her first step, and as she hiked the skirt up around her knees, her shoes squished under the gooey muck. She shook her head and looked toward heaven. "Please don't let this day get any worse!" she pleaded as she started up the road.

She now resented the lace and satin she had adored just hours ago, as it did little to protect or warm her body. Shivering uncontrollably, she concentrated on putting one freezing foot in front of the other, willing herself to hurry. The wind and rain whipped through her as

she tried to walk along the roadside in the grass. Idly, Kristen wondered if this was punishment for leaving Michael at the altar, but she discarded that thought as soon as it surfaced. After the phone call at the church that had exposed his deception, she'd had no other choice. Briefly closing her eyes, her fiancé's face came unbidden to her mind.

Michael Forbes. The man she had given her heart to and who should have been her husband by now. A bitter smile came to her face when she thought of how easily she'd fallen in love with him. He was a man who was used to getting what he wanted, and she had been intrigued by his air of confidence from the very beginning. He'd traveled the world, he was charming and intelligent, and he understood the craziness of politics that was her daily life—something she'd never found before in dating. They had worked well together. Her stomach clenched into knots at the self-recrimination she now felt at being so thoroughly deceived by him. How could she have been so gullible and trusting? She thought she knew him inside and out, but that had all come crashing down with that one phone call from her bank, just moments before the wedding.

Straightening her back, she pushed down her heartache and concentrated on her anger. She wished she had her laptop with her so she could see the extent of the damage. The fact that he'd tried to transfer funds from her bank accounts to the Al-Rahji bank in Saudi Arabia was bad enough, but Michael was in charge of the finances for all the campaigns the company ran countrywide. Would he have dared to embezzle from Strom and Pierson? In a political consulting agency, image was everything, and they didn't need the scandal. Sighing, she shivered both from the enormity of it all as well as from the cold. Why did Michael even have accounts in Saudi Arabia? Was this really fraud? And if so, was it his first attempt? She doubted it. But she couldn't call the authorities without detailed proof, and she still wanted to ask him what he was doing—and why. He had barely seemed fazed by her public accusations. It seemed to have caused only minor tension—his jaw clenching and his brown eyes turning hard and angry, daring her to say another word. He kept saying she would understand everything if she would just let him explain, but she hadn't let him. Something big was going on here, and she was going to find out what it was.

Shaking her head in frustration, Kristen tried again to process what had happened, but she couldn't fathom the depth of his deceit. As she stumbled through the sticky mud in shoes that were not meant for hiking, in a dress that seemed to weigh more and more by the minute, exhaustion began to overtake her. She felt ready to give up her bank account for nothing more than a hot shower and a warm bed. Squinting through the downpour, she thought she saw the log fence that separated their cabin from the neighbor's property. "Thank you," she breathed, her salvation within sight.

Refusing to take one more step on the muddy road, she decided to climb the fence and shortcut through the property, hoping that the trees would give her some shelter from the rain as she walked the rest of the way to the cabin. Hiking up her skirts even farther and gathering the soggy, heavy mess in one hand as best she could, she stepped on the first wooden rung of the fence, steadying herself on the post. She was swinging her leg over when her dress caught. Hearing a terrible rip, she tumbled out of control, landing in a heap on the other side. The tears began to well in her eyes as she lay back in the mud. "Why?" she yelled, pounding her fist into the oozing, watery trap.

Kristen tried to sit up but only seemed to sink farther into the mud. *I wonder how long it would take for someone to find me if I just lie here and die of hypothermia*, she thought to herself. *Would anyone even miss me at this point?* As she was contemplating the ease of such a plan, a low masculine voice shouted over the pounding rain, "Can I help you?"

She looked up at the shadowy form, startled that anyone would be out on this sort of night. Sitting up quickly, she realized how vulnerable she was. Squinting through the darkness, she demanded, "Who are you?"

"I'm Ryan . . ." He stopped. "Kristy, is that you?" He offered his hand to help her up. She looked at the hand for a moment, recognizing the man it belonged to. He still had dark, curly hair, though it was matted to his head with the pouring rain, and his eyes were the same as well. But something was different . . . His face seemed more angular now, she realized, and the dimple in his chin was more pronounced.

Kristen groaned, rolling her eyes toward heaven. *I specifically recall asking You not to let this day get any worse.* “Yes, it’s me,” she said loudly, ignoring his hand and getting awkwardly to her feet on her own. “What are you doing up here?”

She watched his eyes travel the length of her, annoyed at the surprise she saw. He motioned behind him. “I thought I heard something so I . . .” He stopped. “Where are you headed?”

“I’m going up to my family’s cabin for a few days,” she said stiffly. “For some *solitude.*” He didn’t respond, so she added, “My car broke down and I had to walk. I’ll just be on my way.”

“I don’t think so,” he said calmly, taking her arm. “You’d better come home with me.”

“I will not,” Kristen gasped. “Let go of me!” She twisted out of his grasp and began walking toward her cabin. “I don’t need your help,” she said over her shoulder, just as her pumps got lost in another soggy mud puddle, bringing her splashing to her knees. Ryan was instantly beside her. “Leave me alone!” she shouted, and to her humiliation the tears that had threatened to fall began in earnest.

He took her by the waist and helped her to her feet. “Kristy,” he reasoned, “your father hasn’t kept food at your cabin for years. The electricity’s turned off. If you come with me, you can have a hot bath, some food, and a good night’s rest. I’ve got my sister’s kids over for the night; you’ll be perfectly safe.”

Kristen closed her eyes. She knew she’d be safe with Ryan. In all the time she’d known him, he’d been a perfect gentleman. In fact, it was a sore spot for her. Opening her eyes and looking into his concerned face, she felt temptation flooding her mind. A hot bath did sound much better than a cold sponge bath. But in the same house as Ryan Jameson? That was asking too much. “How do you know my father doesn’t keep the electricity on up here?” she asked suspiciously.

He started walking, his arm around her shoulders propelling her to walk with him. “I come up here regularly, and I talk to your father quite often. More often than you, I’d wager,” he said, glancing at her meaningfully.

Kristen scowled. She didn’t need him analyzing her life. “That’s none of your business,” she said, pursing her lips.

“Well, it’s good to see you haven’t lost any of your spunk,” he answered with a laugh. “How’s your brother?”

“Fine,” she ground out, the scowl never leaving her face. This wasn’t how she’d pictured the moment she ran into Ryan Jameson again. Of everyone in this town, she’d most wanted him to see what she’d made of herself. Taking a deep breath, she rubbed her shoulders angrily to generate some warmth, but it was no use.

Ryan didn’t say anything else, and they trudged along in silence, the lights of his family’s cabin growing closer. Kristen didn’t think she could walk another step, and the shivering just wouldn’t stop. Ryan tried to draw her into the crook of his arm for warmth, but she pulled away.

He let out a snort of frustration before shrugging off his slicker to put it around her shoulders.

“What are you doing out here anyway? Are you running away again?” he murmured close to her ear as he helped her with the slicker, but she was too tired to answer.

Her senses were overloaded and exhausted. She stumbled in the mud, and Ryan caught her. He swung her carefully into his arms and started toward the house. Kristen protested, but he shook his head. “I am not going to let you die of hypothermia because you’re too stubborn to see when you need help.”

“I’m not stubborn,” Kristen argued. “I’m just fine on my own.”

“Kristy,” Ryan started but stopped as he adjusted her weight in his arms. “I’m not going to argue with you about this. We’re almost to the house, and I don’t want to have to drag you in unconscious.”

Truth be told, Kristen’s muscles were shaking and her body didn’t seem to be obeying her commands anyway, so she gave up and relaxed. Within moments, he’d carried her into the house and through the living room, grunting slightly before depositing her in front of the bathroom door. “There are fresh towels in the closet. I’ll go see if I can find you something else to wear.”

Kristen closed the door behind her and tried to undo the row of tiny buttons that stretched all the way down her back. She couldn’t do it. Closing her eyes in frustration, she sat on the edge of the tub. There was a rap at the door. “Is everything all right? I don’t hear any water running.”

There was no way she was going to tell Ryan Jameson the problem. She didn't want his help. But the tub looked so enticing, and she was wet, muddy, and tired. She opened the door a crack. "I can't undo all these buttons to get out of this dress."

It was obvious Ryan was trying to hide a smile. "I'll go get Jennifer," he said. Within moments he was back. "You remember Alex's oldest daughter Jennifer?" he asked. "She just turned six." The girl looked sleepy, but she smiled at Kristen.

"It's nice to meet you, Jennifer," Kristen said, resisting the urge to pull on one of the girl's long pigtails as she'd done so many times to the child's mother. Jennifer looked so much like Alex. It made Kristen miss her old friend—the old days. "The last time I saw a picture of you, you were a little baby! You look a lot like your mother."

Jennifer wrinkled her nose and nodded. "Everyone says that. Uncle Ryan said you need help with your dress."

Kristen turned around so Jennifer could see the buttons. "It's all these little buttons. I can't reach them."

Jennifer rubbed her hands together as if getting ready for the task. "Is this your wedding dress?" When Kristen nodded, Jennifer tilted her head, assessing Kristen's appearance. "You got it all dirty."

"I know," Kristen said. "I'm not planning on using it anymore."

Ryan had been standing at the door listening to the exchange, but at these words he ran his fingers through his hair and abruptly turned, setting the package he was holding on the counter. "I'll go get some hot chocolate going," he said as he walked away.

Jennifer shut the door and stood on a stool to begin undoing the buttons. Stifling a laugh, Kristen watched her in the mirror. The girl was deep in concentration, her tongue sticking out between her teeth. "Do you know my Uncle Ryan?"

Kristen nodded but didn't say anything.

Jennifer continued. "We came up here to help my Uncle Ryan. My mom says he's grouchy because Aunt Victoria's not here anymore," she explained conspiratorially. "So we came to cheer him up because all he does is work, work, work."

"Well, that's nice of you to spend some time with your uncle," Kristen said, hiding her own reaction to the news she'd just heard. Was Ryan divorced? Or had his wife passed away? Why hadn't anyone

said anything to her? “Did your Aunt Victoria go to heaven?” she asked carefully.

“No. But my dad said once that she’s going to the other place,” Jennifer whispered dramatically. “But my mom said she’s just a lost soul and that Aunt Victoria hurt Uncle Ryan really bad. But it’s a hurt that you can’t see. That’s why we visit him a lot.” She jumped down from the stool. “All done,” she announced.

“Thank you,” Kristen said as she turned around and the fabric gave way. Jennifer’s chattiness also reminded her of Alex and all the times she and Kristen had whispered their secrets about their older brothers.

“No problem.” Jennifer rubbed her eyes. “Uncle Ryan said you’re sleeping in my room. Don’t worry about making noise when you come in. My mom says I can sleep through anything.” Jennifer opened the door, then asked slowly, “How come you’re not getting married?”

Kristen bit her lip, her emotions about her almost-marriage still close to the surface as she contemplated how she wanted to answer the little girl. It was all so complicated. “I just need to think about some things,” she finally said, her voice little more than a whisper.

Without skipping a beat, Jennifer informed Kristen, “I’m going to marry Aaron. He’s a boy in my class, and when we get married I’m going to have a princess dress and lots of flowers.” Kristen smiled. At the sound of Ryan’s voice, Jennifer started down the hall, still talking about the Cinderella dress she would have at her wedding. Kristen’s smile turned wistful. If only life had stayed as simple as it had seemed when she was six.

She shut the door and locked it. Turning on the water, she stripped away what was left of her ripped and muddy wedding dress. Sliding into the water, she closed her eyes, luxuriating in the warmth. She looked around the bathroom noting there was not a trace of femininity anywhere. No lacy towels, no cute hand soap, no attention to detail. It was stark and clearly stated that Ryan was no longer married. *Why would that matter to me?* she thought, but her emotions betrayed her. Even after all these years, Ryan still evoked feelings in her—feelings she was determined to squelch. Kristen willed herself to think of something else. She sat up and undid some of the pins still in

her hair, and the long blonde curls spilled down her back. She lay back down, the simple gesture making her arms ache. She closed her eyes, her mind running through the events of the day—Michael's angry brown eyes watching her walk away, her father's hard, cold stare, and then Ryan.

Kristen sighed, a mental picture of Ryan and his little sister Alex coming to her mind. Kristen and Brandon had spent every moment they could with the Jameson family—until Ryan's twenty-fifth birthday party. That night had changed everything.

Rubbing her eyes as if that would erase her thoughts, she decided she'd feel better after a good night's rest, so she quickly washed her hair and climbed out of the tub. Unfolding the bundle Ryan had left on the counter, she realized they were a woman's pink satin pajamas. *Probably his ex-wife's. Alex would never wear something like this*, she thought. The memories of Alex warmed her. When Kristen had gone away to school, they'd lost touch, and Kristen regretted it. It had been too long. With a sigh, she dried herself off and put on the pajamas. They were a little small on her five-foot-eight frame, but they'd have to do. She draped her ruined dress over the shower curtain rod, mopped up after herself, and peeked out the door. Ryan was nowhere to be seen.

She turned down the hall to the living room Ryan had carried her through earlier. She'd always loved this room, its large stone fireplace the focal point. Smiling, she recalled all the times she and Brandon visited the Jamesons, laughing and roasting marshmallows around that fire. She drew closer to the crackling warmth, hoping it would help dry her hair before bed. That's how she stayed until Ryan came in—her back toward the fire, wrapped in one of the sofa blankets his mother had crocheted.

"I brought you some hot chocolate," he said amiably, his tall frame making her feel small—not something she was used to given the heels she wore at work. "I don't want you collapsing from hypothermia or something."

Kristen smiled wryly, tipping her chin to look up at him. "I think we'd know by now if I had hypothermia." She took the mug from his outstretched hand, noting that his hair was still damp and curling slightly at the back. He'd changed out of his wet clothes and was

wearing jeans and a faded Harvard Law School sweatshirt. “Thank you,” she said.

He sat down in the overstuffed leather chair across from the fireplace. “So, do you want to tell me why I found you in a mud puddle wearing what I think was a wedding dress?”

“No,” she answered quickly, all traces of a smile gone. “I mean, I’m sorry—you’ve been really nice. I’d just really rather not talk about it,” she added, trying to take the harshness out of her voice. Turning to face the fireplace, the image of Michael’s angry eyes came back to haunt her.

Ryan got up and stood behind her. “It’s okay,” he said. “I won’t pry. If you do want to talk about it, though, I’m here.”

She shrugged and folded her arms, knowing she had no reason to feel defensive but finding the impulse hard to dismiss. “I’m fine, Ryan. Really.” *Or I will be once I can sort this thing out.*

“Kristy,” he started but sighed when he saw her stiffen. “Why don’t you sit down?”

She glanced up at him and, at the sincere concern in his eyes, took a deep breath before sitting down in a large, comfortable loveseat. Ryan didn’t say anything. He just took his chair opposite hers again and watched the fire crackle as it died down to embers while he sipped his hot chocolate.

“Do you remember the last time we were up here?” he finally asked softly, still keeping his eyes on the fire.

Kristen closed her eyes for a moment at his words. How could she ever forget it? “Not really,” she lied. “It’s been a long time. My life has kept me pretty busy.”

“I’ve been following your career,” he said. “You’ve done all right for yourself.” Crossing his ankles, he looked at her. “Things really took off for you after you joined Strom and Pierson.”

“Yeah, that was a good move,” Kristen agreed, a little surprised to hear it from him but secretly glad that he knew something about her career. “Did you know they’re the top political consulting agency in the country?” she teased, the old, competitive spirit kicking in like when they were kids.

“What I want to know is how you went from being a campaign writer for an obscure campaign to being interviewed on CNN when

your candidate lost the party nomination for president.” Ryan gave a little laugh. “I never would have imagined it.”

Kristen bristled. “Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. Weren’t your comments to me a few years ago pretty much along those lines?”

She could have kicked herself. Ducking her head, she took a sip of hot chocolate, wincing and hating the fact she’d let on that she remembered.

Ryan held up one hand and drew his eyebrows together. “No, I don’t recall exactly.” He paused for a moment, then continued. “Kristy, that night was really confusing for me, and . . .”

“Forget it. I’d rather not talk about it. Besides, it was so long ago that it doesn’t matter.”

Ryan looked at her as if he wanted to say more, but he didn’t. “I thought you did great in your CNN interview. I only caught the last half, but your answers were smart—you knew all the right things to say.”

Kristen was glad for the subject change. She was definitely more comfortable with this line of conversation. “That’s my job, Ryan,” she said, standing. “And I’m good at what I do.” She set her mug down on the table beside her.

“You’re not the kid I remember,” he said, rising to stand next to her. “I thought I knew everything there was to know about Kristen Shepherd.”

“It’s been years. There are a lot of things about me you don’t know, Ryan,” Kristen replied, trying to stay nonchalant.

“I’ve wanted to apologize to you for a long time, Kristy. I hope you know that. But you seemed intent on cutting ties with everyone you knew back here.” He slid his finger back and forth around the top of his mug as if he were nervous. “Why haven’t you kept in contact with Alex at least? She’s missed you, you know.”

Ryan spoke softly, but his words were like daggers in her heart. She’d missed Alex as well, but it was just too hard to face the Jameson family. She tried to shake off the memories and focus on the present. She wasn’t a shy and backward girl anymore. She was a professional businesswoman who was confident and capable. “I don’t know what you mean,” she replied, moving toward the hall. “We just grew up and got busy. I still care about her.”

He touched her arm, willing her to look at him. "I really am sorry," he said. "I never meant to hurt you."

Kristen's ears burned. "Don't worry about it. I think we're beyond this now." She pushed her fingers through her hair and took a deep breath. "It's been a long day for me. If you don't mind, I'm going to bed."

Ryan nodded his head. "I didn't mean to upset you." He set his mug down next to hers. "Your room is just down the hall. I thought you could sleep in Alex's old room. There are two single beds in there; Jennifer is sleeping in one. Benjamin and I will be in my parents' old room. Do you remember where everything is?"

She nodded her head. "Don't worry, Ryan," she said, starting down the hall. "I can take care of myself." The irony hit her then. Those were almost the exact words she'd said to him when she'd left all those years ago.