

Back to the Bedroom

Chapter One

There were seven row houses on the 400 block of A Street NE. Six of them were Federal style: narrow three-story redbrick buildings with long, arched windows and flat roofs. Each had a small false front peak imprinted with the date of construction-1881, 1884, or 1888. As was the custom at that time, basements were accessible from the front, five steps down. The first floor was five steps up. Front doors were sunk into arched alcoves, and the doors were thick oak, capped by decorative leaded windows. Yards were small, minuscule actually, but packed with flowers, herbs, ivies, and stunted dogwood trees.

The residents of A Street NE used every available inch in their tiny yards just as they filled every available second in their busy lives. It was a carefully restored Capitol Hill neighborhood with inflated Washington property values. And it was inhabited by ambitious professionals. The street wasn't so wide or so heavily traveled that it couldn't be crossed to say hello. Old-fashioned globed streetlights studded the narrow margin between curb and redbrick sidewalk, casting circles of light on shiny BMWs, Jaguar sedans, Mini Coopers, and Saab 900s.

In the middle of the block, flanked on either side by its tall, dark, dignified Federal neighbors, sat a fat two-story Victorian town house. Its brick had been painted pale, pale gray, the elaborate ribbon-and-bow stucco trim was gleaming white, and its gray tile mansard roof was steeply slanted. The house was dominated by a rounded half-turret facade with a conical gray tile roof tipped in silver and topped with a flying horse weather vane.

It was an outrageous house, a birthday cake in a showcase filled with bran muffins. And it was inhabited by David Peter Dodd, who at first glance was neither birthday cake, nor bran muffin, nor A Street material by any stretch of the imagination. With his brown hair, brown eyes, medium build, and average height, he wasn't a man you would immediately notice, and he preferred it that way.

He was thirty-one but looked younger, and he was sitting on the front stoop of his house reading an X-Men comic book when a large object fell from the sky and crashed through the roof of his next-door neighbor's house.

Katherine Finn, called Kate to her face and the Formidable Finn behind her back, was in her kitchen when she heard the crash. It sounded more like an explosion than an intrusion. The overhead Casablanca fan jiggled from the vibration, windows rattled, and a bedraggled hanging Boston fern broke from its moorings and smashed onto the kitchen floor. The half-empty quart of milk Kate was holding slid from her fingers. She felt her heart jump to her throat, muttered an expletive, and ran to the front door, pausing in midstride when the house settled down to eerie silence.

Kate stood absolutely still for a moment, listening, but she was unable to hear anything over the pounding of her heart. When her pulse rate slowed back to a normal

beat, allowing her some semblance of rational thought, she concluded if anything were liable to explode it would have to be in the cellar. There were things down there that made odd rumbling noises when they were working. There were pilot lights and emergency off-on switches and an intimidating tangle of pipes and wires.

She took a deep breath, opened the cellar door, and sniffed. No smoke. She switched on the light and crept down the stairs. No fire. No evidence of explosion. She shook her head in confusion, turned to go back upstairs, and let out a shriek when she bumped into David Dodd.

Dodd looked at her over his wire-framed glasses and reached out to steady her. "Are you okay?"

She clapped her hand to her heart and gasped for breath. "You scared me!"

"I heard the noise, and I came to see if you were all right. The door was open. . . ." He made a vague gesture in that direction and removed his glasses.

They'd been neighbors for three months, but he'd never been in her house. In fact, he'd never spoken more than three words to her at any one time. That hadn't stopped him from forming an opinion.

He'd observed that she was a woman who moved fast and kept erratic hours. She didn't dally between her car and her front door, barely taking time to wave and mumble "hello" while she fumbled for keys. She usually rushed by him in a stern black coat that hung almost to her ankles, with a huge leather purse slung over her shoulder, a grocery bag balanced on her hip, plastic-draped clothes from the cleaners caught in the crook of a finger, and more often than not, she was dragging a large, odd-shaped metal case that was equipped with casters and stamped with a bunch of travel stickers.

Because he didn't know her name, Dodd thought of her as the Mystery Woman. He was fascinated by the amount of raw energy she exuded between curb and doorstep. Her impersonal, hurried hellos annoyed the hell out of him. And he hated the damn black coat.

Dave knew he was in big trouble when he started hating the coat. It was just a piece of clothing, for crying out loud. It belonged to a woman who was a virtual stranger. So what if the coat was unflattering? So what if it was missing a button on the half belt at the small of her back? It was none of his business, right? Wrong. It was driving him nuts. Clearly it was the result of having too much free time on his hands, Dave thought. He was getting weird. He had become fixated on a neighbor who wanted nothing to do with him. He'd been lonely, and wondered if she was lonely, too. And then he started wondering what was under the all-concealing coat. A tweed suit? A silky dress? Maybe nothing at all?

Now he was finally standing next to the Mystery Woman, and his heart was pounding. Normal reaction when worrying about the safety of a neighbor, he told himself. It had nothing to do with the fact that her complexion was flawless, or that she had outrageous Little Orphan Annie hair. She was smaller than he'd originally thought. About five-foot-

five and delicately boned, with a pixieish face and large green eyes. She was wearing a pair of baggy gray sweats that molded to her soft curves and clung to her small waist. David concentrated on her blue-and-gray running shoes while he tried to exert some control over his testosterone level.

She took a step backward and swiped at the wispy curls that fell across her forehead. "I don't understand it. Everything seems to be okay here."

"I guess it didn't make it to the cellar."

She looked at him sideways. "What are you talking about?"

"The thing that crashed through your roof. It must have stopped on the second floor."

Her eyes opened wide. "Something crashed through my roof? I thought it was an explosion in my cellar."

David took her elbow and nudged her toward the stairs. "I think the only thing that exploded was your milk. It's all over your kitchen floor."

"Okay, wait a minute, let me get this straight. You saw something crash through my roof. As in 'dropped from the sky' kind of crashed through my roof?"

"I didn't actually see it so much as hear it. There was a helicopter. I remember it making those whump, whump, whump sounds, then . . ." He made a whistling sound through his teeth and ended with an explosion. "Right through your roof," he concluded.

Kate pushed him aside and took the stairs two at a time. The house was only one room wide. The front door opened to a foyer, which led to the small living room. An elaborate mahogany arch separated it from the dining room, and the kitchen, surprisingly large, was at the back of the house. There were two bedrooms and a bath on the second floor.

Kate halted abruptly at the door to the front bedroom and gasped. There was a huge ragged hole in the ceiling. She looked through the hole into the third-floor attic room and a corresponding hole in the attic roof. Chunks of plaster were strewn about the room, sunlight poured through the roof, and a mist of fine powder floated in the air like fairy dust. The queen-size bed had collapsed, a scarred chunk of twisted metal lay square in the middle of the mattress.

"My Lord, what is it?" Kate asked

David approached it cautiously. "I'm not sure, but I think it's a camera pod from the helicopter. I used to do a lot of photography. Once I did an aerial survey for a new subdivision in Fairfax County, and we had an auxiliary video camera mounted on a pod like this."

Kate felt dazed. A helicopter part had fallen through her roof. It made perfect sense. That was the sort of week she was having. On Wednesday her accountant had called to say her taxes were being audited. She'd gotten a speeding ticket on Thursday and a parking ticket on Friday. And this morning the cleaners had informed her of a "small mishap" to her favorite black coat.

It was all too much even for Katherine Finn, a master at defusing frustration. She was a professional musician, a child prodigy who'd begun auditioning at the age of seven. By the time she was twelve she'd suffered more stress, humiliation, and rejection than most people do in a lifetime . . . and she'd also reaped more rewards and more successes.

She didn't have a temperamental or mean bone in her entire body, but early on she'd learned how to manipulate, how to protect her ego, how to throw a well-aimed temper tantrum. Katherine Finn would never have a heart attack from suppressing emotion. Katherine Finn smashed plates, hugged babies, devoured food, and cried buckets at weddings, funerals, and sad movies.

"Do you know what this used to be?" she shouted at David Dodd as she furiously paced beside the bed. "This used to be a brand-new three-hundred-dollar feather quilt. Prime goose down that was going to keep me warm this winter."

David raised his eyebrows and looked at the quilt with obvious envy.

"I suppose you think goose down grows on trees. Well, let me tell you, I worked long and hard for that stupid goose down. And now what? Who's going to pay for this?" She paused and ran a hand through her hair. "I should call someone," she said. "My insurance company, the police, the airport. Bloomingdale's linen department."

She looked up at the swatch of blue sky showing through her roof. "I need a carpenter, a roofer. Damn, it's Saturday. I'll never be able to get a carpenter out here today. What if it rains? What if word gets around about this? Degenerates and drug addicts could just drop in whenever they wanted." She narrowed her eyes and shifted from foot to foot. "Boy, I'd just like to see them try. I'd be on them like white on rice."

David believed her. She had that tight-lipped don't-mess-with-me look a Doberman gets when he hasn't eaten in three days. Her eyes were a flash of emerald green. Her hair seemed electric. She was getting hysterical, he decided. And she was magnificent. He picked up the bedside phone and dialed.

"Who are you calling?" Kate asked. "The police?"

"No, the pizza place on the corner. You look like you could use lunch."

For the life of him, David couldn't figure out why he wanted to feed this crazy person. Common decency, he told himself. He shook his head. That was a bunch of bull. He wasn't all that decent. He silently groaned and grimly acknowledged that he was hooked. Now that he knew what was under the awful black coat, there was no turning back. He wanted to get rid of the gray sweats. He wanted to get rid of them bad.

Kate looked at the man standing in her bedroom and realized she didn't know his name. Although he'd moved in three months earlier, she'd never introduced herself. She was a lousy neighbor. She probably should have baked him a cake or something. She'd practically snubbed him, and he'd still rushed over to help her when disaster struck. A nice person, she thought. And he was ordering pizza! A little offbeat, but thoughtful. "Is pizza your standard remedy for hysterical women?"

He hung up the phone and plunged his hands into the pockets of faded jeans that had a hole worn through at the knee. He was wearing a blue-and-black-plaid flannel shirt draped loose over a navy T-shirt, and he was standing back on his heels in new white tennis shoes, watching her. "No, but I thought it might be too soon for brandy."

"You mean too early."

"Mmmm. Too early."

Not only didn't she know his name, but she wasn't sure if he was married. She had never seen him go off to work, and she was surprised at how attractive he was. From a distance he'd seemed loose-jointed and boyish, but at close range he had a compact, muscular body. He was about five-eleven with corded arms, a flat belly, and eyes that were a deep, rich brown. The eyes didn't miss much, and they didn't give away much, she decided. Nothing more than he wanted. They were intelligent and perceptive. He had a wide, firm mouth that looked a trifle stubborn but held a hint of humor.

"I don't think we've actually met," she said, holding out her hand. "Katherine Finn. Everyone calls me Kate."

"David Dodd."

"I've been a crummy neighbor."

"Yup."

Kate raised her nose a fraction of an inch. It was an intimidating gesture she used when put on the defensive: a habit developed after years of coping with four brothers and countless arrogant, eccentric music teachers.

Dave grinned at her. "Nice try, but haughty isn't going to work. You should have baked me a cake. Emily Pearson, across the street, baked me a cake. And Mrs. Butler, in the corner house, baked me a cake."

Kate controlled the impulse to make a face and say something rude about Emily Pearson and Mrs. Butler. They were nice people. And they made her crazy. Their windows were always spotless. They put up appropriate door ornaments for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. They baked fruitcakes for neighbors and made chicken soup for sick people. For a woman who once left her Christmas lights up until July and didn't own a pie plate, they were a hard act to follow.

"I was going to bake you a cake, but I just never got around to it."

"It's not too late. You could bake me a cake today."

"Don't get pushy."

The grin widened. "Just trying to be helpful. I didn't want you to carry around a load of unnecessary guilt."

"Very thoughtful of you. The truth is, I'm not much of a baker."

He slung his arm around her shoulder and guided her out of the bedroom, down the stairs. "Hey, you can't let that stop you. Baking isn't so tough. I happen to have a no-fail layer cake recipe that'll knock your socks off. Since you're obviously not the domestic type, I'll make the cake and--"

Kate dug her heels into the runner. "Hold it," she said, hands on hips. "What do you mean, 'obviously not the domestic type'?"

"Domestic types always know how to bake cakes." He stood at the foot of the stairs and looked around at the bare living room and dining room. "And domestic types usually own furniture."

Kate followed his gaze around the two rooms. "I'm divorced. He got the furniture, and I got the house payments." As she appraised the empty living room, she pushed her hair behind her ears, but it immediately sprang forward to its original position.

"I suppose I could use a chair or something, but I haven't much money left over at the end of the month."

She remembered how the house had looked filled with Anatole's furniture. Sleek black leather and gleaming chrome stuff that she'd hated.

"Of course, it's easier to vacuum this way," she concluded.

"I'm sorry about your divorce."

She made a dismissive gesture. "We're still friends. We just weren't destined to live together. We drove each other crazy. The divorce didn't signify failure, but a truce."

"So you're hard to live with, huh?"

"I'm impossible."

"I'm easy to live with," he announced as he followed her into the kitchen. "I'm very likable."

She raised her eyebrows. He was likable all right. He was so likable it was frightening.

He took a cookie from the open bag on the kitchen counter. "Don't you think I'm likable?" He knew he was likable. He'd made a whole career out of being invisible and likable. It was a natural talent.

"You sound a little cynical about it."

He munched on the cookie, surprised that the cynicism had crept out. "It's a curse."

"Uh-huh." Kate dropped a kitchen towel onto the floor and sopped up the milk. "You want to call the police or you want to clean the floor?"

He reached for the wall phone. "No contest."

An hour later, they'd finished their pizza and an FAA investigator had arrived. They led him up to the bedroom.

"So," Kate said hopefully, "anyone report a missing piece of metal?"

The man paled and swore softly at the wreckage. "I'm glad you're not a late sleeper." He photographed the ceiling and the bed and returned with a packing crate. "We'll be in touch as soon as we get this straightened out."

A representative from Kate's insurance company arrived fifteen minutes later.

"Heard on the weather report that it's supposed to rain," he said, looking at the hole in Kate's roof. "Supposed to get colder, too."

Kate peered up at the patch of sky showing through the ceiling and groaned. It really wasn't fair that misfortune had singled her out. She wasn't such a bad person, she thought. A little disorganized and maybe just a teensy bit self-centered. So she wasn't such a great neighbor, but hey, she'd been busy. And it wasn't as if she'd been an awful neighbor. She was quiet most of the time, and she usually parked in her own parking space, and she almost always said hello to him. . . .

The alarm rang on her bedside clock. Simultaneously, an alarm went off in the kitchen. Kate smacked her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Oh, damn!"

Dave reached for the clock. "What's going on?"

"I'm late!" Kate rushed to her closet and grabbed a garment bag. "That's my late alarm. I'm awful with time. When the alarms go off it means I have only half an hour to get to the Kennedy Center and dress. Special matinee today. I knew I'd forget!"

She snagged her big leather purse from the dresser and took off at a dead run. She got halfway down the stairs, turned, and popped back into the bedroom. "Dave, can you take care of this for me? And lock up the house when you leave. And thanks for the pizza."

She was gone. Dave and the insurance man stared out the open bedroom door in silence, unconsciously holding their breath. They resumed breathing at the sound of a car being gunned from the curb.

The insurance man blinked and smiled in amazement. "Is she always like this?"

"Probably."

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By the time Kate returned, it was pouring. She dashed from her car and huddled in the dark alcove of her front door, searching through her purse for her key.

The concert had been followed by a mandatory reception and dinner that had seemed interminable. She'd mentally cracked her knuckles when the consommé was served, tapped her foot relentlessly through the chicken almondine, and bolted down her poached pear in raspberry sauce. When rain had softly pattered against the windows, a variety of emotions had run through her. She'd been relieved that it wasn't a good night for rapists to go prowling around looking for houses with holes in their roofs, concerned that, in addition to everything else, she now had water damage-and had an undeniable yearning for David Dodd's no-fail layer cake.

She shivered as rain drizzled down her neck and soaked into the back of her sweats, and she wistfully longed for the black coat the cleaner had destroyed. The coat had been like Little Bear's porridge. Not too hot, and not too cold. It had always been just right. Not too long, not too short. It had fit her perfectly. And now it was gone . . . just like her roof. Damn.

She wedged her music case between her leg and the door, protecting it from the elements out of habit. She found the key and let herself into the foyer, for the first time in her life feeling slightly insecure in her own house. Her haven, her sanctum sanatorium was vulnerable. It had been violated by a pod. Whatever that was.

"A pod!" she said aloud. "A big, stupid pod."

She shook the rain from her hair and apprehensively trudged upstairs, hating the feeling of doom that had descended on her since she'd entered the house. Don't get paranoid about this, she told herself. It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime freak accidents, and now that she'd gotten it out of the way, the coast was clear. She was in good shape for the next hundred years. Still, it was creepy to have something drop out of the sky into your bed.

She switched the light on in her bedroom and pressed her lips together at the sight of the quilt. It was dead. It smelled like wet fowl, and water dripped from the ceiling with a depressing splat onto the soggy lump of torn coverlet and massacred feathers.

Something thumped overhead. Footsteps on her roof. The sound of a heavy object being dragged toward her. She searched for a weapon, finding only a hairbrush, flannel

nightgown, empty yogurt cup. In desperation her hand closed around a cut-glass perfume atomizer.

"Whoever's up on my roof better not come any closer," she announced, and aimed the atomizer at the hole. "I've got Mace."

David Dodd peeked over the edge and grinned down at her. "That's not Mace. That's a perfume atomizer. The best you could do with that is strip me of my masculine body odor."

"You have to use your imagination."

"Un-huh."

She squinted into the darkness of the third floor. "What are you doing up there?"

"Trying to fix your roof. I'd have had it fixed sooner, but I had to drive all over town trying to find a big enough piece of plastic." He disappeared, and a slab of wooden slats was shoved halfway across the opening.

Kate recognized it as a section of the six-foot-high privacy fence that separated their backyards.

"Hope you don't mind that I used part of the fence," he said, inching it into place. "It's hard to get a lumber delivery on Saturday night."

He walked around the perimeter of the hole and reached forward to tug the wood into place. Then there was the sound of tarred paper tearing and David Dodd dropped like a stone, through the hole in the roof, through the hole in the second floor ceiling and landed with a whump that knocked the air out of him, flat on his back, spread-eagle on the soaking-wet, smashed-in bed.